

Jesus Prays For Us

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 7th Sunday of Easter, May 7, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20; John 17:20-26.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

On the night Jesus was betrayed he prayed for those who in distant lands and far-off ages would come to believe in him. "I pray that they may all be one... May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me."

One of the most divisive assumptions among Christians is that Christian unity means that we should all agree about everything. To be one in Christ is to agree politically, economically, culturally. In other words, all true believers will be Democrats or Republicans or conservative or liberal or dead center. If we're really Christians we'll all be agreed about every point of doctrine and we'll all agree as to how to worship. We'll all like the same kind of music, the same kind of books, the same kind of jokes, the same kind of clothes. That's a very divisive assumption that actually threatens the unity of the church.

When Jesus prayed that all his followers be one he wasn't praying for a monolithic uniformity. I can say that with some certainty because of the people he chose for apostles. He didn't seek uniformity of personality when he chose them. He chose people who were so different, like Matthew the tax-collector who was willing to cooperate with the Roman occupation army, and Simon the Zealot who sought their violent overthrow.

I'm very grateful for the diversity within our church. I'm grateful for the charismatic Christians in our congregation who'd love to see us worship God with a little more abandon than we're used to as Presbyterians. I'm grateful for those who've been nurtured in more traditional forms of worship and find charismatic style of worship extremely uncomfortable.

I'm grateful when the choir sings Bach but I'm also grateful for new and contemporary songs. I'm grateful to the Peacemaking Committee who're deeply concerned about justice issues in the community and world. I'm also grateful to those who have a deep commitment to evangelism; who have a deep desire to see men and women trust in Jesus Christ as their personal savior.

When Jesus prays that all believers may be one the unity he desires is not the unity of uniformity. His prayer isn't a call to identical viewpoints and abilities. The unity he desires in those who believe in him involves, rather, a deep commitment to a common cause. It means a pledging of oneself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ-- no matter how many differences there may be in methodologies, in temperaments, even in theologies and the ways of interpreting the Scriptures. This oneness doesn't deny diversity. It acknowledges at the heart of diversity that there's a oneness of commitment to the crucified and risen Lord.

I think one of the best analogies to the kind of unity that Jesus prayed for is found in marriage. Opposites attract. A man and a woman coming from very different backgrounds chose to unite themselves in the oneness of marriage. They never do become carbon copies of each other. They find in their mutuality of ultimate commitment to each other a richness that would be unavailable in separateness.

The unity that Jesus prayed for takes place on many different levels of the Christian church. First, he prays for unity within a local church. Within our church is tremendous variety. Confrontation is not only allowed, it's necessary. Sad is the church, sad is the family, sad is the community which demands uniformity and which never cares enough to confront. We're a diverse lot of people and yet our diversity is to be

expressed in oneness. How do we do this?

I ask you to visualize in your mind a brother or sister in this church with whom you have a difficult time relating. In the light of Jesus's command to be one, what new attitude does God want you to have about that person? What does God want you to change in your attitude toward that person with whom you have some differences? God doesn't necessarily want you to agree with that person. But maybe God does. One thing is certain, however. At the deepest level God wants you to love that person.

Secondly, he prays for unity within a community ^{such as Oxford} where denominationalism threatens the unity of the church. Think of the bewildering array of churches we have in Oxford. We call ourselves ^{Quakers} Baptists, Mennonites, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Nazarenes, and Pentecostals. What impression does it give to people who don't believe in Christ when one denomination puts down another? Encounter '89 is an attempt to bring the various Christian denominations together to proclaim our common faith so that the world will believe. Yes, I believe that the Presbyterian church has some valuable distinctives that I don't every want to be lost. And I don't agree with everything the Nazarene or the Mennonite or the Roman Catholic teaches. I don't even agree with everything in the Presbyterian church. But we all share a common faith in Jesus Christ. We all believe that salvation ^{for this community} is found in Christ alone. That's why I want our church and our members to be supportive of Encounter '89... the prayer meetings, the training sessions, and in leadership positions if called upon. I want the unchurched in our community to hear all the churches united in the proclamation of the Gospel: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved-- you and your family.

Third, his prayer challenges us to be united with believers around the world. Not only unity within a local church, and unity within a community, but unity with Christians around the world. How often our prayers and concerns go no further than our congregation or our community. John Wesley used to say, "The world is my parish." Christ calls us to be world Christians. He commissioned us to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. One of the purposes for the Mission Year-Book of Prayer is to help us understand the world-wide mission of the church. A portion of the money you give every week is shared with Christians around the world. That money given to mission is not an option in my opinion. Our mission giving is a way we express our unity with believers around the world. When Christ prays that we all be one, his concern is that all who believe in ~~him around the world be united in love for one another.~~

Fourthly, Christ's prayer for the unity of those who believe in him is a desire for unity with believers in past ages. We have come to believe in Jesus through the message of the apostles. Through the ages that message has been passed down from one generation to another through ministers and priests and farmers, and business women and scholars. When we repeat the Apostles' Creed it reminds us of our unity with Christians in all ages. Christian unity must be based on Christian faith. We simply can't enjoy Christian unity if we cut ourselves off from the faith of the church in past ages.

Sometimes we feel we can be more relevant if we want to be delivered to no servant than Jefferson.

I believe that the most important thing in the world is that the world believe that Christ is Lord. The world's hope and salvation lies in Christ. The world is lost if it continues to follow its own way and ignore the way, the truth and the life that is in Christ. That's why it's so important that the world sees Christians in all their diversity united in their

commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

How is that unity achieved? The answer lies in the words of Jesus, "Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you." Christian unity in the local church, in the community, and in the world will be achieved only to the degree that each one of us are personally united with God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. The prayer is "that they may be in us." *Wm. Temple - not in committee rooms.*

The cause of Christian unity has been injured because we love our own ecclesiastical organizations, we love our own distinctive beliefs, we love our own traditions of worship, more than we love Christ and more than we love one another. It's tragic that the church has never shown a united front to the world. Faced by the disunity of Christians the world can't see the supreme importance of Jesus Christ. ~~Let us all be sure that we're~~ united first to God the Father, through faith in Jesus Christ so that the unity of the church will be achieved and the world believe that God sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world.

Let us pray: I pray for all those of us who believe in Christ because of the message of the Apostles. I pray that we all be one. Father! May we be in you and in your Son, just as you are in Christ and Christ is in you. May we be one, so that the world will believe that you sent Christ.