

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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June 2, 2019
7th Sunday of Easter
John 17:20-26

Cross-shaped Love

Today is the last Sunday in the Easter season. Each year there are 7 Sundays of Easter that, of course, begins with Easter Sunday itself. Easter, always occurring in the early spring—some years earlier than others—was relatively late this year. Just to refresh your memories it was back on April 21—6 weeks ago—that we celebrated the victory over sin and death that resulted from Jesus' resurrection. But you'd never know that Easter was late this year by looking out at the weather. Because 6 weeks after a late Easter most years would have us at the tail-end of spring and on the cusp of summer by now. Here we are though on June 2, and some trees are only beginning to show the tiniest hint of green. And I can't remember June arriving before the lilac season that is usually so spectacular in this area. And then to top off the bizarre timing of the environmental clues that we customarily use to get our chronological bearings, we awoke on Friday this week to smokey skies that looked like those at the end of August rather than clear skies at the end of May—apparently the result of massive wildfires already blazing in northern Alberta, directly north of here. Both the slow-coming spring as well as the arrival of wildfire smoke in May are reminders that the world and its systems are not always as precisely cyclical as we might think or like to think.

For us as Christians, everything revolves around Easter. It was the first Easter event that shook the faithful Jews who were keen on the anticipated reality of God's promise to send a messiah who would restore the dignity of the Jewish people who were living under Roman occupation for so long. Their witnessing Jesus' death by crucifixion would have been excruciating in that it appeared to be the tragic end to that hope being realized. For those same Jews it was the ultimate whiplash experience to learn of Jesus being resurrected from the dead, rising triumphantly to forever put away the threat of death. Easter was the beginning of the foundational transformation of the people of God into what became the Christian church.

So on this last Sunday of the Easter season this go round, it's somewhat curious for us to be reading the account of the prayer that Jesus prayed on the night before his crucifixion. In John's gospel chapter 17 is called the Farewell Discourse. It is a treasure trove of Jesus' hopes and prayers for what will become the Christian church.

The setting of this prayer is the night before Jesus died. But of course, the gospel writer was committing this account to the written word long after the events that are referenced, meaning that it was written after the resurrection. So while on the surface it appears that these prayers of Jesus are offered as a sort of last will and testament, a closer look at this prayer reveals some surprising nuances that affect their meaning for us all these generations later.

The form of this prayer is what is called a priestly prayer. In the strictest sense of the word, a priest is one who intercedes—in this case between God and individuals. A priestly prayer then is one that is prayed to God on behalf of another or on behalf of a group of others.

The first thing for which Jesus is praying is unity. He cites the example of the oneness that he shares with God as a model for the oneness that will be realized within the community of faith. There are at least two notable features of this oneness for which Jesus is praying.

The first is that the oneness to which Jesus is calling his followers is a powerful way in which the Christian community will attract attention and interest by those who are not followers of Jesus. When the outsider observes this remarkable oneness, they will be drawn in and desiring of joining in.

Even when Jesus himself was still on the scene, he knew that human nature does not necessarily gravitate to oneness and unity. Jesus could see the seeds of division and conflict right from the get go.

Looking around us today, it would appear that the call to and prayer for oneness is as needed as it ever has been. We are living in a time when unity is under threat. We are led to fall prey to the distinctions that divide and segment people from one another. This happens both within the church as well as outside it. And in the increasingly secular nature of our culture today, non-religious belief has taken almost a religious tone as there are passionate adherents to maintaining a non-religious identity.

While I'm happy to note that our place as Presbyterians in the Christian tradition is one of respect for other expressions of the Christian family, it is not so in all branches of the Christian faith. There are those who make the claim of a purer and more faithful expression of the church in comparison to and at the expense of others

Our brothers and sisters in the United Methodist Church, worldwide, are currently experiencing an excruciating divide that has emerged within its denomination. At issue is whether or not sexual orientation and gender identity are matters that in and of themselves disqualify some groups of people from serving as ordained leaders. In addition, the matter of whether or not local congregations and individual pastors are allowed to perform marriage ceremonies of same sex couples is in dispute. From all accounts it appears that the United Methodist Church is headed for a major schism in which there will be those who breakaway over these matters.

Our own denomination has been through similar discernment processes and once a resolution was made, while there were some who left the denomination, the denomination itself remained intact. Because we have been there as a church, our prayers as Presbyterians, for our Methodist sisters and brothers are needed more than ever.

Whenever issues like these that lead to a breakdown in the unity of the church, Jesus' prayer for unity seem to be for naught.

When the unity of the church is obscured or compromised, our witness as Christians to the rest of the world is weakened and much less effective.

The second part of Jesus' prayer is a call to love. One pastor puts it this way: "Five times within these six verses, Jesus names 'love' as the key descriptor of divine relationships. Love is the bond within the Godhead. Love is the divine gift to the disciples. Love is the magnetic grace through which God seeks to attract the world. Love is the ingredient that the Lord prays will be with his followers." (F. Belton Joyner Jr., *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., © 2009 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 545)

In these parting words of Jesus, in his priestly role, he is calling us to a love that permeates every aspect of our lives as followers of Jesus. This year, our church has been taking on this challenge of Jesus as we have organized our worship and community life around the theme, "Learning and Living God's Love, Together." When we adopted this emphasis a year ago, we, as your pastors, knew that there would be more than enough scriptural material on this topic to sustain us for the months ahead. Next

Sunday–Pentecost Sunday–will mark the culmination of this year. And sure enough, we feel like we have just begun to take on this robust theme. So stay tuned. There’s more to come.

The same pastor that I just quoted on the sharp emphasis on love, goes on and describes the power of this love. “These prayers might seem like sentimental mishmash if we did not know how the story ends. The love for which Jesus prays is cross-shaped love. There is indeed glory in this loving unity, but the glory cannot be separated from the crucifixion. It is self-giving love that is resurrected into new life. The Song of Solomon 8:6 claims that ‘love is strong as death.’ The eternal Christ prays that his disciples might be ‘with me where I am.’ This is no small matter, considering that [Jesus] was on his way to his death.” (*ibid.*)

There is nothing sentimental about love when we understand it as cross-shaped love.

There is one more aspect of this prayer of Jesus that makes it even more powerful for us today than perhaps it was 2000 years ago when it was first uttered by Jesus.

Much of what we read in the gospels are accounts of what Jesus did in his ministry. They are accounts of his interactions with those who he ministered to when he performed miracles of healing. The accounts of Jesus’ teaching are in the context of who was there to hear his teaching—whether that be the disciples, the Pharisees, the crowds, the civil authorities. As we read these accounts we receive the teaching of Jesus by way of watching and observing—much the same way as we learn from watching a news account or documentary on TV.

In the case of this final prayer of Jesus, we today are brought into the center of his prayer in a very special way. Jesus is praying not just for his disciples of his day, he is praying on our behalf as well. He is praying on behalf of you and on behalf of me.

It’s in the very first verse we read. “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, . . .” (Jn. 17:20) That’s you and me isn’t it? Isn’t our belief in Jesus based on the word of God that we have received from others, often those who have gone before us? Jesus is talking about you and me because our belief in him is the result of an unbroken line of believers in Jesus going back to Jesus himself.

And what is the prayer that Jesus prays for you and for me? “. . . that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (Jn. 17:21)

How awesome it is that Jesus prays for us and that Jesus desires a unity that will share his love, his cross-shaped love, with those who will carry on after we have finished our race.

You know, this learning and living God’s love, together, is our answer to Jesus’ prayer for us.

Wow! Thanks be to God!