

SERMON Intimacy and Commission
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Olivet Congregational Church
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John 17: 20-26

20 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that 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. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

25 'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'

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How often are we asked to pray for someone? I know we pray for others every Sunday during worship. I also know that some people have a list in their homes of people that they have been asked to pray for and do pray for the people on that list every day.

How often do those for whom we pray hear us, hear our prayers for them? Probably not often. Often the people we pray for are not present when we pray.

I recently heard a story of mom and her children, specifically her eldest son, who was about to start middle school. Now, as you know, middle school can be a big deal. It can be an even bigger deal when the youngster has been home-schooled for all the years prior to middle school. This particular young man had not disliked

home schooling. But he asked his parents to allow him to go to public middle school to be with the friends he had made at church. And his parents agreed he could go to the public school.

Now, in this household, the mom and her children would say bedtime prayers each night. They prayed together.

But on the night before his first day of middle school, as the son was getting ready for bed, he stopped. He asked his mother to pray for him. She reminded him that they prayed together each night. But that wasn't what her son wanted. Her son asked her to pray for him like she did each night after their together prayers, when she thought they were asleep.

You see, that mom would return to her children's room and pray for them each night while they were sleeping. Her son had overheard those prayers and it had made quite an impression on him. So on the night before he was to start middle school, that new and different thing, he wanted to hear the prayer that she would be praying for him that night - her prayer to God for him as he started middle school.*

In our scripture reading this morning, Jesus was overheard by his disciples in his prayer to his Father. It was an intimate prayer with his Father, but it was a prayer for them. In this, his final prayer in John's gospel for his friends before his death, Jesus had not gone off to some mountaintop or out into the desert or into a garden. He was not responding to a request to teach them to pray by giving them a recipe for prayer - The Lord's Prayer. No. Jesus had shared his last meal with his friends and then he prayed for them. Aloud. He wanted them to hear his prayer to his Father for them.

It was an intimate prayer – Jesus poignantly and lovingly speaking to his Father. But Jesus' intimate prayer was meant to be overheard. Jesus was speaking to God on behalf of his disciples. But it was not only on behalf of his disciples in that moment in time. Jesus' prayer was on behalf of all who would be his disciples in the future; generations and generations of followers, including us. Jesus prayed, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us."

Jesus was praying that his followers then and those who would hear of him from them for generations to come might be one – one with him, one with his Father, one with each other. He was praying for oneness. Jesus prayed, “so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

One in love. Visible to the world. God’s love made visible through his followers. That was Jesus’ prayer to his Father for his followers. That they might be one – with him and his Father and with each other. From the beginning of John’s gospel, from the beginning of time, Jesus was one with God and became one with humanity to show us God. John tells us, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” (John 1:18)

And why would God do that? John tells us, it is because “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16) God so loved the world. Love.

The reason for Jesus’ life, the key to that oneness with the Father and the oneness with all people would be love. And that love was meant to hold his people together and be visible in the world and to the world.

Jesus prayed for his friends, that they might overhear his prayer, that they might understand God’s love and his mission in the world. But he also prayed this prayer so that his friends would know what Jesus expected of his followers. They were being called to live as one as well.

Now, God created humans in God’s image, in the image of love. But God also made humans different from each other. Our God creator created diversity in the human race. So, while Jesus prayed that his followers might become one, he did not expect them to be the same.

I think The Message version of scripture for this passage says it wonderfully:

*I’m praying not only for them
But also for those who will believe in me
Because of them and their witness about me.*

*The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—
Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,
So they might be one heart and mind with us.
Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.
The same glory you gave me, I gave them,
So they'll be as unified and together as we are—
I in them and you in me.
Then they'll be mature in this oneness,
And give the godless world evidence
That you've sent me and loved them
In the same way you've loved me. (The Message)*

Krista Tippett, is an award winning journalist and host of the public radio broadcast and podcast entitled On Being. She shares segments of some of her interviews in her book, Becoming Wise; An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living. She shares the story of a young man named Nathan Schneider. He had no religious affiliation, was a None. She led into her interview by sharing her observation that “the growing universe of the Nones – the new nonreligious – is one of the most spiritually vibrant spaces in modern life.” She introduced Nathan as a “millennial public intellectual, straddling journalism, the academy, social activism and religion.”

She shared his account of the Occupy Wall Street movement, a protest in response to the financial crisis of 2008, which included a spiritual component. He wrote, “When young people in the secular and social political movement that was Occupy Wall Street started turning their attention to churches – sometimes actually protesting in front of them – it wasn’t that they were protesting the things that a church would claim to believe. What they were actually saying was, “Church, act like a church!” (p. 171)

Now Nathan had been raised to explore different faith traditions. He studied the history of many religions and actually chose to be baptized at age 18 in the Catholic Church. He discussed with Krista Tippett the questions that people who are searching ask, like whether God exists. And he continued that the proof that seekers sought was actually in relationships. He explained “The real power of a lot of these arguments is in the kind of relationship that they’re forging - the way in which they express God in and through an account of relationship between people.” (p 172)

He went on to share the little known story of “Occupy Sandy.” You see, those young protestors at Occupy Wall Street were protesting in NYC when Hurricane Sandy struck. They wanted to do something. They wanted to help. They actually set up the first website identifying where people could deliver supplies. To churches.

These protestors, who perhaps had no experience with church or had been wounded by churches, worked side by side with religious people, people of faith communities. Nathan explained that they could see

“the power of those communities, see the resilience of those communities in a way that their movement had not been able to build for itself. And they would see what they could draw from the ideas of those traditions... They started recognizing that there was something real in this religious language that connected with the frustrations that they were feeling with society around them.”
(p 174)

Connecting with society around them. Being in relationship.

Jesus prayed for his disciples and for us, that we might be in relationship, one with him and his Father. He prayed that the teaching he shared and the love he shared would be passed on to future generations, not only in word, but in the living of the lives of his followers – reaching out to others in our wounded world and living lives of justice, compassion, healing, forgiveness, peace, and love. Especially in Love. On that night, Jesus prayed

*I'm praying not only for them
But also for those who will believe in me
Because of them and their witness about me.
The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—
Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,
So they might be one heart and mind with us...*

*Then they'll be mature in this oneness,
And give the godless world evidence
That you've sent me and loved them
In the same way you've loved me. (The Message)*

As we strive to be followers Jesus, may we be one with Jesus and our Creator and one another. May we be Church. May we love.

*Working Preacher - Sermon Brainwave Podcast for 5/29/22, story shared by Professor Joy J. Moore

Tippett, Krista. Becoming Wise; An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living. (New York: Penguin Press, 2016) p. 171-175.