

A Desire for Oneness

In the last couple of weeks, the Gospel reading from John's Gospel account was from the last discourse, or instructions that Jesus gave to His disciples on Maundy Thursday, the night before He died. He had just given them His new commandment that they should love one another just as Jesus had loved them. As we learn from studying the Gospels and Jesus' life, we see that this love is an outward looking love that seeks to help those in need rather than looking at what we want. While today's Gospel reading is still a part of this last discourse on Maundy Thursday, Jesus' focus changes. Chapter 17 is Jesus' prayer to the Father and not said to the disciples who were with Jesus in the upper room. It is a rather strangely worded prayer as it seems as if Jesus is talking in the third person at times and in the first person at other times. Some of it, today's Gospel reading for example, sounds more fitting for an occasion such as the Ascension, where Jesus bodily ascended to heaven, which was this past Thursday than it does for Maundy Thursday. What also makes this text difficult to understand is that it could have been written by Dr. Suess or Lewis Carol in *Jabberwocky* - it can be confusing and sound circular in its statements. Be that as it may, we still can glean some important things from what Jesus had to say. If we take it slow enough, we can get a grasp of what Jesus is saying in this prayer to the Father on our behalf.

I should also point out that when John refers to the 'world' he is not referring to the creation, but rather to the way in which the world without God works. That is by a power obtained from being the 'king of the hill.' Whoever is in power sets the rules and these rules can change either at the whim of those in power or when the power changes hands. Those in power will typically use their

power to stay on the top of the hill while those without power will try to get to the top of the hill.

One of the themes that is evident is the importance of being one with each other. In the next couple verses after this reading, Jesus talks about being one with each other just as Jesus and the Father are one and Jesus asks that the disciples become a part of that one. But what does that 'oneness' look like? Do we all believe, act and do the same things? Do we cast out those who dare to do something differently? I would think that somewhere in each denomination's history, there was an expressed belief that to be saved, to be 'truly Christian' everyone had to belong to their church. Some believe that at the end of the world, there will be only one religion and the establishment of that one religion would signal the end of the world.

When Jesus talks about being one with the Father, He isn't talking about only doing what the Father wants. The kind of relationship Jesus has with the Father is that they can each put forth an idea, a plan and through discussion they decide together what to do. To those outside of the relationship, they seem to be one, in that they "think alike and talk alike and act alike." Each has an equal voice in the relationship and each fully supports what the decision is.

So, what does our oneness look like? According to 'the ways of the world,' whoever has the most power gets to say what is done. Does our oneness mean that we all have to do the same thing, believe the same things, interpret Scriptures the same, pray the same?

I've often used Paul's example in the 12th chapter in First Corinthians where he uses the body to demonstrate what the church is like. Just as the body needs all the different parts in order to make a whole body, so does the church. Each part of the body brings a different function to the whole and the body cannot be

one without the different parts. Likewise, each denomination brings something different to the 'body' of the church. As long as Jesus is seen as the head, is accepted as the Messiah and the oneness of the Trinity is accepted, then we are a part of the one body in Christ. We have 'oneness' despite whatever differences there may be between denominations outside of these core tenets of our faith.

A modern-day example of our 'oneness' would be a table for a pot-luck dinner. We all come to the same one table and place our dishes on it. We have different dishes, but one table. It is each of the dishes together that makes the table whole. Each dish in itself would not constitute a whole meal, but all the dishes on the table would make a whole, complete meal. While there are those who would like all desserts on the table, that wouldn't be best for us. Some of us would like all meat dishes, but again, that wouldn't be best. It is when all the dishes are there that there is a total meal. If a dish is brought, but not shared, then it isn't part of the meal. So, we need to bring our dish to the table and share it with others in order to be 'one'. But that meal isn't really complete until there is sharing among all who come to the table.

It's this oneness that Satan wishes to destroy and from whom Jesus prays that we be protected. It is Satan, those powers of the world, that try to control the table, decide which dish is put on the table and who can and cannot come to the table to eat as well as when different people can come to the table. Typically, the groups that are most different from the controlling powers are allowed to the table last, when most of the best dishes are gone or there isn't much left. Jesus prays that His disciples, those who follow Him do not become subject to this kind of control of the table. To give the impression that we are not controlling of the pot-luck table, there is the tendency to isolate ourselves from those who are not

like us, isolating ourselves from the world. This only changes where we put the gate, so to speak, in controlling who has access.

Jesus prays that we not become isolated from the world, because God wants the whole world to be included in the table feast. Earlier in John's Gospel account Jesus states that (paraphrasing) "God so loved the world, that He sent His only Son so that all who believe in Him, that is all who wish to come to the table, can come and enjoy the feast that is at the table."

Just a quick observation on the word 'sanctify' which Jesus uses at the end of this text. This is one of those archaic words which we 'understand' but can't give a good definition for. To sanctify something is to make it holy. Something is made holy by the presence of God. While we do acknowledge that God is present everywhere in the world, we do not always recognize God's presence and action in the world. Here, Jesus is praying that we recognize the presence of God in the world and not only acknowledge that but also show the world how to act in the presence of God.

May we always be able to recognize and acknowledge God's presence among us and may we always welcome whoever wishes to come to God's pot-luck table.

YouTube Links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/cJ79CAdxnkk>

Service: <https://youtu.be/cKR1xTKK5Dg>