

The Prayer For The Church Jesus Is Still Praying

John 17: 20-26

In Jesus' last days, when he knew the end was near, he prayed for disciples and for those who would come after them, the church. The entire chapter 17 is that prayer. I will focus on the last section of it, verses 20-26. The prayer is a simple one, and it is Jesus' fervent hope for us: that we, his church, may be one.

Today, around the world there are no less than 45,000 Christian denominations! Jesus is still praying his prayer.

What we call the Ecumenical Movement began in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910. Its mission was worldwide Christian unity. It addressed the scandal of the dividedness of Christ's church he prayed might be one. The word *ecumenical* means the whole inhabited earth as the household of God. Jesus prayed that the whole church be one household of God.

I

“Holy Abba”, Jesus prayed,

...keep them in your name

which you have given me

that they may be one

even as we are one (17:11)

Who is the “them” for whom Jesus prayed? His disciples gathered around him of course. But not just them, for all who would come after them because of their word and witness—like us, for example!

I ask not only on behalf of these
but also on behalf of those who will believe
through their word.

How large is this circle? Larger than we can ever know or imagine. In John 10 Jesus said,

I am the good shepherd;
I know my own
and my own know me.
And I have other sheep that are not of this fold.
I must bring them also,
and they will hear my voice
so there will be one flock, one shepherd. (10: 14-16)

Do you ever wonder whether you are in the flock or in the right flock? These words should be good news to you. Jesus the good shepherd is forever going after all his sheep, wherever they are, so that there will be one flock, and one shepherd.

Two of the most wonderful words in the Bible are the word “all” and the word “one”. God is forever at work to redeem us *all* and to make us *one*. Some people prefer the word “some” and distrust the word “one”. They prize “separateness” and the superiority of their separateness. Southern Baptists refused to be part of the Ecumenical Movement and join the National Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches.

This is not the heart of God, nor the heart of Jesus who prayed that we be one.

As we think about the church imagine two circles. The first is the “visible church” and the second is the “invisible church”.

The visible church is easy to see. Look at the rolls, count the members. The sociologist and accountant can give you a good picture of the visible church. And yes, there are at least 45,000 sub-groups in this church.

But the invisible church is known only to God. These are the ones who walk in the ways of God and follow Jesus on his path. These are the ones who have heard the shepherd’s voice and loved it and now follow it. These are the ones who in whatever religion, love God and love their neighbor. These may or may not be members of the visible church.

Some like to think that the invisible church is smaller than the visible church, made up of the truer, purer church they belong to. The *real* believers. But I like to think that the invisible church is way vaster than the visible church, broader than Christianity itself, for God is at work in the lives of all people throughout the world.

III

So what does oneness mean and what did Jesus mean when he prayed that we be one? We start here: it is the same oneness that Jesus experienced with his Abba. There is the source of it. Jesus was one with God as the waves which join the sea. It is a spiritual oneness. Mysticism in all its forms in all religions has been about oneness with God, with life itself, like the waves which rejoin the sea. Some call it the “unitive experience,” where we no longer feel separate but now at one with God, with life, with self, with others. I think we all have such unitive experiences. God made us all to be mystics. Sometimes it happens in church, perhaps more often out of church. You are outdoors and suddenly all the world seems lit with beauty and love.

In the unitive experience, the ego begins to fall away and we become one, as when you are swept away and lose yourself in the middle of a hymn at church, as you awake and see the world as the grandeur of God.

The word “ego” is a tricky word. For me it is the self we have constructed, not the self God has made. We all need egos, they are a kind of container of what we have made ourselves to be in order to survive day by day. But they are not our truest deepest selves. So we need to say to our egos, you can have a seat at the table, but you are not the table! Sometimes we are given those moments of oneness with God and life in which the ego falls away. It is a husk no longer needed.

If the church is to be one, both congregations and the larger church, we must hold our egos more loosely, or loosen their hold on us.

IV

This oneness has a number of expressions. One is the oneness of *being*, when God’s *being* and our being merge. There are many kinds of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession. There is prayer with words. There is prayer that is listening. But there is also prayer that is merely *being* with God. This is contemplative prayer in all its many forms. We let ourselves just be with our Maker. Gordon Cosby used to remind people that we are human *beings*, not human *doings*.

The holy name God gave to Moses at the burning bush was *Yahweh*. It means I AM. God is a verb, the verb of being. God is *being* itself. And we can be part of God's beingness.

Another form of oneness is the oneness of *moral purpose*, when we join together to be part of what God is doing in the world. We join in God's passion and purpose for the world. We roll up our sleeves, get to work together and enjoy oneness. Pass me that hammer!

A third way of oneness has to do with how we *see* the world. The famous monk Thomas Merton was at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville. It was March 18, 1958. He had an experience of oneness. There's a bronze plaque on that corner today in Louisville remembering that vision. His words describing that experience are on my study wall at home. Here they are:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I love all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like wakeing from a dream of separateness.... I have the immense joy of being [human], a member of a race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this!

But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around *shining like the sun*. (emphasis mine) ¹

This is what God wants for us all: to awaken from our dream of separateness, to see we are indeed one, that we are all walking around shining like the sun. As the Psalmist says: “Look to God and be radiant”. (Ps. 34:6)

It is what the disciples saw at the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus appeared shining like the sun. And it is who we are too, if only we could realize it. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins saw it all the time, everywhere, this oneness, this shining. In one poem he wrote:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is,
since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch,
matchwood, immortal diamond
Is immortal diamond. ²

V

This yearning of oneness is one of our deepest, if not our deepest, longing, a longing to be one with God, with ourselves, with others, with life itself.

It is also our longing for the Church, Christ’s longing and our own.

Oneness is not sameness. Oneness expands, sameness “en-smalls”. Sameness constricts, oneness is spacious. Sameness is our futile attempt at oneness. God glories in oneness, not in sameness. Look at the marvel of the varieties of human and created life! God loves the varieties of God’s world, but beneath it all is the oneness of God and of all life.

Oneness is a gift of God, the same oneness Jesus had with his Abba. And this oneness, like love, is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Come Holy Spirit Come.

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1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures Of A Guilty Bystander* (N.Y.: Image Books, Doubleday, 1966), pp. 156-7
 2. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “That Nature is a Heraclitan Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection” *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) p.106.