



LAKEWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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*PRAYER ... LET US BE ONE*  
John 17:20-26

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It's hard to read this passage from John's gospel without feeling a bit guilty. After all, it's a very intimate moment between Jesus and his heavenly Father, as Jesus prays. Jesus knows, of course, that he is about to die on a Roman cross. That is the backdrop to all that he says and does in these his final moments prior to his arrest and conviction. And, it is what Jesus ironically refers to in his prayer as his "glory." His "glory." Imagine. Jesus is about to give up his life, and he calls it his "glory."

But then again, we wouldn't know that if we weren't eavesdropping on his private prayer with God. And that's where our sense of guilt comes in. It's as if we are listening in on this intimate conversation between Jesus and his Father, and there's something in us that tells us we really don't have any right to do that. Our mama taught us better than that.



How many of you have cell phones? With the proliferation of cell phones in the world today, it is hard to imagine a time when there were "party lines." I'm definitely showing my age, but back when I was a kid growing up in St. Clairsville that's what we had. One phone in the home, but you had to share the line with other families on your street. Some of you remember those days, don't you? For the rest of you "young-uns" out there, you need to know about this, if for no other reason than to realize just how far we've come.

The obvious question is this: How did you know when the call was for you? Well, each household had a distinctive ring, not quite like the distinctive rings that cell phones have today, but nonetheless distinctive. Two long rings and it was for somebody else. If it was one long and then a short ring ... you ran to pick it up! You got a phone call, wow! That's the way it worked. So ... when the phone rang and you knew it was for one of the other families sharing your line ... you weren't supposed to pick it up.

You weren't supposed to pick it up. There was an ethic involved in being on a party line.

But if you weren't so ethically inclined, you could eavesdrop in on the private phone conversations of the other families. Okay ... I admit it. I used to do just that, but not very often. I'd get caught. Our neighbor, Mrs. Snodgrass, somehow knew when I would pick up the phone because I would hear: "Terry, hang that phone up right now or I'll tell your mother." I didn't realize until sometime later in life that Mrs. Snodgrass could see from her kitchen into ours.



Phone calls are one thing, prayer is another. Is there also an ethic when it comes to prayer?

Well, maybe this prayer of Jesus is not so private after all. You see, Jesus is talking about his followers. And notice what he says: "I ask not only on behalf of these," referring to his disciples, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word." Jesus is praying for ALL the generations of believers who will come to faith through the witness of his disciples. In other words ... Jesus is praying for US! So, maybe it's not so bad after all that we're listening in on what he has to say, because if Jesus is praying for US, it's good for us to know what it is he is praying about.

Not only that, but just a few moments ago we had this morning's Prayers of the People. You were invited to share your joys and concerns ... a form of prayer in and of itself. And then I addressed a prayer to God on behalf of us all and you were allowed to listen in, were you not?

It's kind of like the children's sermon. By its very nature, this is a time for the children. Yet, when Katie – and the others who do it from week to week – well, they always use a microphone. Do

they do that so the children can hear them? No, of course not. They are standing right in front of them. Katie and the others use a microphone so the rest of us can hear. But it's a sermon for the children. Why are we allowed to hear it? Because sometimes the gospel is heard best when it is overheard.

That is the nature of Jesus' prayer we overhear in John's Gospel. He intercedes on behalf of his disciples, and allows them to listen in on the conversation he is having with his heavenly Father. Why? Because there is tremendous value in knowing that you have been prayed for. (Please excuse the dangling participle.)



Floridians are very familiar with "snowbirds." In my church in Akron we had a number of people who were "snowbirds." One couple, Dewey and Marge Stillwell spent many enjoyable, warm winters in the Naples area. However, one year, as they were heading back to Ohio in April, they were involved in a car accident in South Carolina. Marge was in critical condition. Dewey, who escaped with minor cuts and abrasions, called the church to ask us to pray ... we did just that!

Several weeks later, at a Wednesday night dinner that was just about half over, in through the double doors to the fellowship hall walks Dewey pushing Marge in a wheelchair. They had just gotten back into town and without unpacking a bag headed straight for church. As they made their way in, I looked into their faces. And suddenly, I was struck by a realization I had never before experienced. I hugged them, as did others, but then I said, "I want you to look at their faces. Those are the faces of people who know they have been prayed for."



Our service of worship this morning has been filled with prayer. We've had our Prayer of Invocation followed by the Lord's Prayer. Together we shared in a Unison Prayer of Confession. There was a prayer following the Children's Sermon and a Prayer of Dedication after we received our offering. And of course, the Prayers of the People.

All these prayers have been offered to God in the name of Jesus. Yet, we've all listened in because not only is there value in knowing we've been prayed for, prayer by its very nature ... especially prayer in worship, and even more especially the prayers we say for others in worship ... prayer by its very nature is COMMUNAL. It involves the WHOLE faith community, YOU and ME.

WHY is that so? Well, I have a theory. Notice in our passage that Jesus prays for his disciples. Then, he prays for those who will believe in him through their words. And what does he ask for on their behalf? It is a very simple request, but one with oh, so important ramifications. He asks: "That they may be one" ... that there be a "unity" in their hearts.

"That they may be ONE."

Maybe Jesus asked for this because he knew it would be the HARDEST thing in the world for his followers to DO ... to be ONE in SPIRIT and PURPOSE.



At this point in his life and ministry, there are only eleven of Jesus' disciples left. Judas, the betrayer, has gone off to claim his blood money. And even the ones remaining are in a fog as to WHAT Jesus truly wants them to do. They've all got their own ideas, their personal agendas. Who knows what will happen after Jesus is gone from them? So Jesus prays to his heavenly Father and asks that his followers be ONE in SPIRIT and PURPOSE.

Like I said, Jesus knew how hard it would be for his followers to be of one heart. And that has certainly been true throughout the history of the church, hasn't it? You got your Catholics, you got your Presbyterians. Look at the signs in front of the churches just a half a mile away on San Jose Blvd, and you'll find such odd names as Methodist and Baptist, Episcopalian, Lutheran and yes, even

Christian. And within a couple of miles of here, you got your Word of Life Church, and you got your Nazarene, Assemblies and Agapes.

Even when people claim the same name, it doesn't mean they're all on the same page. In Jacksonville alone, there are 26 Presbyterian (PCUSA) churches ... not to mention the other two denominations of Presbyterians in Jax: the Evangelical Presbyterians and Presbyterian Church in America. You would find some major differences if you were to ask questions in all of these congregations.

And if we were to talk about the differences of opinion and theology we have right here within Lakewood Presbyterian ... don't worry, I'm NOT going there today, no way! We are a diverse group of individuals who call our church a loving family of God, but if push comes to shove ... there would be some major discrepancies in the way we feel God leading us. Am I right?

Yet, Jesus prayed that his followers would be ONE.

Taking all of this into consideration, you might be led to think that God decided NOT to answer Jesus' prayer, because ONENESS is hardly our strong suit. But let's not blame our divisions on God. The reason we are not one is because we're so doggone stubborn in maintaining WHAT we believe.



E. Stanley Jones, the famous evangelist, once said, "Talk about WHAT you believe and you have DISUNITY. Talk about WHO you believe IN and you have UNITY."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Nazis and hanged just a few days before his concentration camp was liberated by the Allies. Yet, he said:

"I can no longer condemn or hate other Christians for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble they cause me. In intercessory prayer the face that may have been strange and intolerable to me is transformed into the face of one for whom Christ died."

"I ask not only on behalf of these," Jesus said in that prayer we've been privileged to overhear, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one."

To pray like Jesus is risky, because to pray like Jesus, is to pray for what God wants. And what God wants may not only be different from what WE want, it might run completely counter to our desires. After all, despite the best prayers of Jesus, he still died on a cross. To pray like Jesus is RISKY.

Nevertheless, if we are to pray as Jesus prayed, we must ask to be made ONE in SPIRIT and ONE in PURPOSE. And if God, in God's mercy and grace, chooses to hear our prayer and grant it ... just THINK of the possibilities that would come our way.



And so, are you ready to pray? Before we do, is there someone you need to forgive within your church family? Within your own family? Isn't that a kind of prerequisite for prayer? Didn't Jesus teach us to pray saying something like that? "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Who do you need to forgive today? Or for that matter who might you need to ask forgiveness of? (Sorry, another dangling participle.) But think about it ... think about it ...

Are you ready now? If so, repeat after me:

Lord, make us ONE ... not that we have to believe the same all the time ... but that together ... we believe in You ALL the time.

In Jesus' name we ask this ... Amen and Amen.