



**John 17:20-26**

# A Plea for Unity

Vienna Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James  
John 17:20-26

April 2, 2017

My 94-year-old father is in worship this morning. He has said of me that I am the least likely person he has ever known to go into ministry. That, my friends is a sermon for another day.

I first entertained the notion of following Jesus in my first year of college. I had never before read the Bible. Sure, I read parts of the Bible in middle school to join the church but that doesn't count since I did not have my mind on what I was reading.

I figured the way to read the Bible is to start at the beginning. I fared pretty well in Genesis and Exodus. I bogged down in Numbers. No doubt reading a census of the 12 tribes of Israel had something to do with it. So many strange sounding names and obscure places that I lost interest.

I asked people for help who seemed to know their way around the Bible. They suggested I begin with the gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Since they recommended John most often, I started there. My spiritual awakening happened somewhere in John. Jesus' miracles and teaching took hold of my life.

We are preaching our way through John's gospel this year. We invite you to read along with us as we explore what Jesus' life and teaching can mean for our lives.



**Farwell Discourse**

We find ourselves in a portion of John's gospel called Jesus' Farewell Discourse. Let me provide some context. Jesus' public ministry has concluded, and he knows

his days are numbered. His enemies have been plotting his arrest. Jesus calls together his 11 disciples (Judas has already defected to the dark side) to issue what amounts to Jesus' last will and testament.

Jesus closes his last discourse with a prayer. It is Jesus' longest recorded prayer—660 words. We call it his high priestly prayer since Jesus intercedes for himself in verses 1-5, his disciples in verses 6-19 and all believers in verses 20-26. This is where we come into the story, given that we fall into the category of all believers.

Notice what Jesus prays for in future generations of believers. He does not pray for our success or safety. He prays for our unity.



Three times in successive verses, he prays that we may be one. Verse 21—“That they all may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” Verse 22—“That they may be one as we are one.” Verse 23—“I am in them and you are in me—so that they may be brought to perfect unity.”

This is not the first time in his prayer Jesus prays for unity. Jesus prays earlier for his disciples, “That they may be one as we are one” (17:11). If Jesus prays this much for our unity, he *really* wants us to be one.

Four observations come to mind about the unity Jesus prays for in these verses.

First, the unity Jesus prays for is possible only through Jesus Christ. Unity is not something we create or

manufacture on our own. We participate in the unity God offers us through Jesus Christ.

People will sometimes tell me that they have made their peace with God. We cannot make peace with God—not when God makes peace with us through Christ.

Jesus prays, in verse 21, “that I am in the Father just as the Father is in me.” Together, God the Father and Jesus the Son dwell in us through the Holy Spirit, the focus of last Sunday’s sermon.

God makes unity and peace possible through Jesus Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in his book *Life Together*, “Unity is not an ideal to which we must strive; it is a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”



Second, the unity Jesus prays for does not equate to uniformity. Jesus and God the Father display this distinction. They share a single

divine essence while maintaining distinctive roles and functions. There is unity within our triune God but not uniformity.

Luke describes the early church in Acts as being of “one accord.” Eleven times, he describes the early church this way. Being of one accord does not mean they all dress alike, talk alike or act alike. Rather, they share unity of purpose. Jesus does not pray for our uniformity. He prays for our unity.



Third, the unity Jesus prays for is not naïve about human conflict. Read the New Testament letters. There were sharp differences of opinion among people of faith and good will. The distinguishing mark of Jesus' unity is not the absence of conflict but the presence of a reconciling spirit. The unity for which Jesus prays is not a fantasyland where disagreements never surface and contrary opinions never become verbalized. He is not praying for a soft, mushy unity where everybody holds hands and sings "Kumbaya." Jesus' unity actually reconciles people to each other.

Fourth, the unity Jesus prays for is not an end in itself. The unity Jesus offers will be the means by which people will come to know Jesus Christ as Savior of the world. In verse 21, Jesus prays, "May they be in us so that the world may believe you sent me." "So that" functions as a purpose clause in this sentence. Jesus' unity is for the expressed purpose that people will believe through our unity. Jesus prays for much the same thing in verse 23: "I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to perfect unity. Then the world will know that you sent me."

One of my all-time favorite quotes has relevance here:

"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all

things, charity." While people attribute this quote to St. Augustine, it originates with an obscure 17<sup>th</sup> century pastor with an odd sounding name, Rupertus Meldenus. He wrote these words in 1627 during the 30 Years War in Central Europe. The 30 Years War had religious motivations. He

IN ESSENTIALS, UNITY  
IN NON-ESSENTIALS, LIBERTY  
IN ALL THINGS, CHARITY

penned these words when religious tensions were at a feverish pitch.

“In essentials, unity.” We ascribe to three central beliefs in this church: Jesus is Lord, Scripture is our authority and everyone follows Jesus. These beliefs are core to our mission, non-negotiables. If you want to join us in ministry, commitment to these three beliefs are core to our mission.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15, Paul writes about matters of “first importance.” He goes on to enumerate matters of first importance: “that Christ died for our sins and was raised on the third day” (15:3-4). Following *Jesus is Lord* has first importance for this church.

“In non-essentials, liberty.” Non-essentials are inconsequential only alongside what is essential. We may disagree about believers versus infant baptism, how Christ is present in the Lord’s Supper or the details of Jesus’ Second Coming. We exercise liberty in secondary matters while keeping the main thing the main thing.

“In all things, charity.” Charity is an old-fashioned word. It originates from the Latin *caritas*, a word translated love in our day. Jesus laid down his law of love in his farewell discourse. “My command is this: love one another as I have loved you” (15:11).

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I offer two applications for your consideration today:



First, that we as individual Christians and collectively as a church, recommit ourselves to foster our shared life in Christ. Jesus Christ is the one thing we

all share in common. Our unity is not contingent on being Anglo-American or African-American or Asian-American. Our primary identity is not Republican or Democrat. Jesus is the glue that holds us together. It does not matter whether we share a natural affinity for each other. We seek to arrange our common life around our shared allegiance to Jesus Christ. We make it our first priority to study his teachings and follow his commands. We cannot waste time playing church or espousing the American dream. We hold everything we do against a single plumb line of following Jesus.

Second, that we as individual Christians and collectively as a church, display a greater willingness to have difficult



conversations with each other. We are not playing fake-nice with each other. We must be willing to engage in hard conversations with each other about things that matter.

Take the hot button issues of abortion, gender identity and same sex marriage. We must have the courage to engage in civil discourse with each other on issues polarizing our nation right now. How does our allegiance to Jesus Christ and our commitment to Scripture inform our understanding of these issues?

Let me mention another area where we need crucial conversations—in interpersonal relationships. It happens all the time—people feel slighted or disrespected by something said or done by somebody in this church, myself included. I do not mean to imply this happens because people here are

mean and nasty. It happens because we are broken, sinful people.

Our unwillingness to have difficult conversations will tear at the fabric of any community. Isn't it telling that the root word for community is *unity*?

Let me describe a familiar pattern in churches. People feel disrespected or slighted by something said or done to them. Instead of going to people most critically involved to have a crucial conversation, they talk to people on the periphery of the dispute. They engage everybody else in the dispute rather than going to the source. Worse yet, they drop out of the community or stomp off to another church. This is not the Jesus way. Unity involves a willingness to have difficult conversations with each other so we can come to a more complete unity.

Paul writes in Ephesians, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one unity, and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (4:3-6). *One* appears seven times in this passage. In football, we call it piling on. Paul brings us back on point again. Jesus prays that we may be one. Make us one, Lord.

