

The Church for Whom Jesus Prays
John 17:20-26
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If eavesdropping is not considered a sin, it certainly falls in with those social practices that are roundly condemned. Eavesdropping is at best impolite and at worst, treasonous. No one likes to have their private conversations made public. That is why we close our doors and speak in whispers and invest millions in new technologies designed to prevent our e-mail messages from falling into the wrong hands. Eavesdropping recalls the Cold War, and spies, and secret decoder rings in the bottom of cereal boxes. We want our words to go only to their intended audience, especially if we are saying something about someone else. It may be sad to say although I think it is true, that most of us get a thrill from overhearing something not meant for our own ears. We are then in on a secret, or a hot tip for the stock market, or a juicy bit of gossip. And when we are not in the know, our ears are certainly burning if we think that someone is talking about us. Friends, your ears should be on fire right about now, because Jesus is talking about you.

Today's passage from John is divine eavesdropping, the overhearing of a private conversation between Jesus and God, first overheard by the disciples and then broadcast loudly by John who records for all ears everywhere the words of Jesus' farewell prayer. The prayer on which we are *allowed* to eavesdrop is a prayer in which Jesus turns over to God the care of his beloved and believing

community. He must leave them to return to be with God for his mission is finished, and so he asks God to fulfill the promises he has made to the disciples. What makes our ears burn is that this prayer is indeed on our behalf, especially this section with its words that seem timeless, in which Jesus prays for those who will one day believe as a result of the testimony of his disciples. Friends, that is us. Jesus prays for us, today. That's a radical notion, isn't it? That Jesus would pray for us? We are the ones who are supposed to be praying for one another, without ceasing even. Yes, Jesus taught us how to pray and yes, he set a fine example, but the idea of him praying for us is not one we usually think about. Sure he prayed for the disciples, but here, Jesus is actually praying for us, generations and generations into the future, praying for we who are "those who will believe in me" through the words of the disciples. This is pretty powerful stuff, perhaps even powerful enough to make us stop and think what it means.

To what extent the name of a church influences its view of itself, I cannot say. Do members of a First Presbyterian Church consider themselves at the top of the class of Presbyterians, especially when there is a Second or Third or Sixth Presbyterian Church in the same town. Do members of a church called Grace United Methodist Church feel themselves to be particularly full of grace? Perhaps it is a sad commentary on church identity, but I never have seen a church called Servant Presbyterian or Peace With Justice Lutheran. There are some fairly descriptive church names out there, like one near Sacramento, California called

Shepherd of the Sierra Presbyterian Church, and in Pittsburgh, there is a new church development called the Hot Metal Bridge Church, but most are named for their towns or named in the order they were founded or named for the street on which they are located. Even Escazú Christian Fellowship falls into that category. But in light of today's passage from John, I wonder how would we feel about ourselves if our church were called The Church for Whom Jesus Prays or maybe for short, The Praying Jesus Church. It sounds kind of Las Vegas, I know: The Praying Jesus Church, the PJC. With a little imagination, maybe you can see the neon here in the chancel and the little plastic praying Jesuses that we could hand out to visitors, and the embroidered praying Jesuses on all the vestments and paraments of the church, and maybe even a TV ministry called the Praying Jesus Power Hour. All the prayers would start out "O Jesus who prays for us, hear our prayer." Hey, this could really put us on the map.

Of course, I'm being silly but think about it a little longer with me. How would our understanding of what it means to be Christians be changed if every week we walked in under a banner that proclaimed "Jesus Christ Prays for This Church!," if every month we received a newsletter that had a return address that read The Church for Whom Jesus Prays, San José, Costa Rica, if everyone in town rightfully referred to us as the Church for Whom Jesus Prays! I wonder if then we might begin to truly realize the wondrous gift that Jesus prays for us, prays for our safety in the world, prays that we might be one, even as he has experienced

oneness with God. How would our self-identity be changed if we took as our beginning point, “We are a community for whom Jesus prays?”

To begin to answer that question, I would suggest we take a closer look at specifically what Jesus is praying for on our behalf and pay attention to what it is that we are called to do and what we are not called to do. Jesus knows that his hours on earth are numbered. He has prepared the disciples to the best of his ability, he has washed their feet and eaten the Last Supper with them, he has commanded them to love one another, and he has promised the Holy Spirit as a continuing presence in their lives. All that remains for him is the cross and the glory it brings, his resurrection and the life it brings, and his ascension and the power it brings. But before he heads off to the events of Holy Week, he turns from the disciples and addresses God directly. Jesus prays for his own glory, he prays for the disciples, he prays for their holiness and their protection, and then he goes one step further and prays for the oneness of we who believe because of the word of the disciples.

The content of the prayer is pretty straightforward, even if the language sort of goes back and forth. It is a prayer for unity in the context of Jesus’ hour of glory. Listen again to Jesus’ words: “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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, 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.” It is a pretty simple formula really. God and Jesus are one, Jesus and his followers are one, so please God, make believers in every age all one together, so that the rest of the world will know who is Who, who sent Whom, and what this eternal life business is all about.

And so, when I first began to look at this passage I thought to myself, “Self, here is a great call to Christian unity. Tell the people to be a unified bunch of Christians, for our oneness would surely glorify God in all things. But as I dug deeper into the mysteries of the Gospel of John, I realized that this was altogether the wrong thing to ask of you, for it is *not even* what Jesus asks of you. Friends, Jesus asks many things of us, but the making of ourselves into a oneness the likes of which Jesus shared with God is not one of them. You see, Jesus asks God, not us, to make us one.

I hope you will allow me to split some theological hairs, because admittedly, I have few actual hairs of my own left to split. Jesus squarely places the possibilities for our unity in the hands of God. Is this because we are not capable? Or because it is more expeditious to have God do it? It seems that Jesus recognizes that our only hope for oneness depends on the oneness of he and God. The prayer is not a challenge *to us* to make ourselves one, but a request made to God for this special gift to humanity. And this gift is given for a purpose: that the world might know that God has sent Jesus and that God has loved Jesus and that God has loved

us. The prayer is that believers throughout time might reflect the unity of God and Jesus, and thereby make known that eternal life is found in knowing Christ.

But what about our disunity as Christians? How will others know Christ if we ourselves cannot agree with one another? We are clearly divided, aren't we? Or are we? The many different denominations and traditions of Christianity are often seen as symptomatic of our disunity as Christians. We disagree on so many things. We can't even get our act together on something so basic as whether or not the elements in the Lord's Supper are actually transformed into the body and blood of Christ or are merely symbolic. We are clearly not a unified people. But what shall be our definition of unity and are we really speaking about unity or unanimity, two words we cannot afford to confuse with one another, two similar sounding but very different words. Let's be clear. The word "unity" is a noun which means oneness. The word "unanimity" is also a noun, but it means the quality or state of being unanimous, literally "being of one mind," being in total agreement. Is this our calling? To be in absolute agreement in all things? Or is our call to be one in the things which matter: loving God and loving neighbor? As Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure, he says very clearly to *them*, "love one another." But in his final prayer to God, Jesus very clearly says to *God*, "Make them one." These are two very different things. We believers are not called to create unity; we are called to love. And even when we do agree on some things, we don't agree on everything. Even in our Bible, all the stories about Jesus do not agree. John tells a

very different story than Matthew who is very different than Mark. From the very beginning, Christians have been one, but they have never been unanimous.

Perhaps the unity that God gives us is found in something much more basic than we have been lead to believe. You see, God has already made us one: one in baptism, one in affirmation of Jesus as Lord and Savior, one in love for neighbor and God. The rest is a striving for unanimity on our part, striving toward a vain hope that somehow, someday, if we could all just get along, if we could all just agree on every matter of faith, life, and witness, doctrine, dogma, and sacraments, that we would achieve the unity that God has planned for us. But we will never agree. We will never be able to do it on our own. And so here is the good news for the day. In his prayer, Jesus calls upon God to make order out of chaos, to make oneness out of multiplicity and that makes it God's job, not ours. Our job is to believe and to love and to serve, to wash one another's feet, even if Peter washes the left foot first and Paul washes the right foot first. It is a silly example to be sure, but wars have been fought over less.

I started out by saying that we were fortunate to be able to eavesdrop on a conversation between Jesus and God. We have learned a lot from that experience so let's try it again, but this time we'll eavesdrop on a Hollywood conversation that shows how easily we can overlook the obvious in our midst and run ourselves ragged instead. According to a well-traveled and perhaps even true Tinseltown fable, during the filming of *The Marathon Man*, Dustin Hoffman and Sir Laurence

Olivier are sitting side by side, having their make-up put on for a scene they are about to do together. Sir Laurence looks over at Hoffman and notices he looks just terrible. His eyes are bloodshot, and he looks simply exhausted. “My God, man. What’s the matter with you?” And Hoffman explains that since his character is supposed to have been up all night and weary for the following scene, he’s actually stayed up all night to be more convincing. And Olivier turns to him and says, “Well, if you want to be convincing, why don’t you just try acting?”

I asked how our self-identity would change if we thought of ourselves as a community for whom Jesus prays. Perhaps we would spend less time striving for unity and more time enjoying the unity we have been given. Perhaps we would spend less time agonizing over our differences and more time using the gifts that come with our differences. Perhaps we would relax and let God be God, as only God knows how. Perhaps it would be a big burden lifted from our collective shoulders to know that there are some things for which we do not need to take responsibility, because the hardest jobs, like creating unity, offering eternal life, making order out of the chaos of the universe, these are left to someone who knows how to take care of them. This church knows how to pray; we are not shy about saying to others, “Pray for me.” And when we ask, it is not so much because we think God will be swayed by one more vote on our behalf, but because the prayer of another means we are not alone in our trials or our suffering. This is true for our unity as a people of God. This is true in our families and in our workplaces

and in our schools. This is true for whatever needs we have. Jesus prays for us and we do not go it alone, but together in his unity. May God give us the strength to love and serve, and may God make us one, even as Jesus has prayed on our behalf.

Amen.