

THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER FOR THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

A sermon for May 13, 2018, by the Rev. Dr. James Mutayoba
The Seventh Sunday of Easter, Ascension

Gospel: **John 17:6-19**

'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.'

If there is anything that we all long for it is someone to pray for us. People come to me all the time asking me to pray for them. They seek my prayers when things are not going well. There is always a sense of relief and hope when ***I pray for them***. I become a partner in their troubles, in finding a solution.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus, in the role of the High Priest, prays for his disciples. In no other place in the Gospels does Jesus pray such a prayer for his disciples -- only in John 17. This prayer is Jesus' *final will and testament* as his time to depart this world draws near. The prayer extends beyond his immediate disciples to include the entire Church. The main phrase of the prayer is, "That they may all be one" in his name. He prays for the unity of the Church.

Jesus had given his followers the Word, and they had grasped it. Their training was complete. They were ready to graduate without cap and gown, without a tuxedo for the prom. They needed prayer more than special clothes. In his role as the High Priest, Jesus prayed for them before he sent them out into the world. He prayed for their unity.

Unity in HIS NAME.

My sermon today addresses the question of **unity in diversity** -- in the church, in congregations, in denominations and in the Church at large.

At a global Church conference, two representatives from different denominations could not agree on a particular theological issue. One grabbed the other by the

neck and said, 'In the name of Jesus, I will fix you.' What kind of Christian unity is that?

This is what Jesus wants his followers to know:

First: whose we are.

We are in *joint custody of the Father and the Son*. We are the possession of God and his Son. God loves us, cares for us, and protects us as his own. We are God's beloved possession and God values us. We are in God's good hands and **Jesus is glorified** when **sinners** stay united.

Second: The followers of Jesus are in the world.

The fear for any parent is how a child will survive on his or her own in a hostile world. So, it was equally frightening for Jesus to leave his disciples in the world. The world hates us. There are diseases, famines, wars, hostility, etc. **Christians are in this world and yet they are not of this world.**

Third: We have dual citizenship

We are in the world but we are not of the world. We are **saints and yet sinners**. We face trials and tribulations like everybody else. We are happy because we are in **joint custody** of the Father and the Son. That makes a difference.

What did Jesus have in mind when he prayed for unity?

The disciples **were in the world** so that they could win more souls from the world. Jesus did not want to remove them from the world for that very reason. But, they **were not of the world** because they belonged to God. His prayer was for the disciples to stay united in the mission of reaching out to the world.

In the same way, **we are in the world** so that we will win more souls from the world. Jesus does not want to remove us from the world. But, **we are not of the world** because we belong to God. His prayer is for us to stay united in the mission of reaching out to the world.

Surely, living in the world while actively citizens of heaven is a challenge. '**United we stand, divided we fall.**'

There is a Persian poem written from a husband to his wife saying: "**A hundred times have I fought with my beloved; a hundred times have I befriended her. She knew nothing of my fighting or of my befriending her.**"

We succeed when we are able to **bury our differences** and work together. Have any of you visited the Grand Canyon? It is as many as 18 miles wide in some areas and 1 mile deep in places. Many young persons take the risk of hiking the canyon alone. Some have lost their lives. The lack of patience and the choice of going-it-alone can diminish one's mental capacity. It is a taxing environment. It is easy to get 'dehydrated' -- not only in water but in thinking and

also in decision-making. The Wisdom writer says, '*where there is **no counsel people perish.***' Going-it-alone doesn't work. Unity works!

Certainly, when people work together **disagreements** and **grievances** may arise. Whatever the **cause of contention**, repeated instances will lead to **resentment, anger, jealousy, vindictiveness** and **animosity**. But we could take a lesson from the buffalo or some cattle. When these creatures are defending (their young, for instance) against attack, they form a circle facing outward. The young, inside the circle, are protected. They unify for protection against danger.

A story is recounted of a child who was lost in a field for two days. People searched the field repeatedly looking for the child, but without success. Then someone suggested that they **join hands** and comb the entire field together. It was not long before they found the child. Unfortunately, it was too late. One person lamented, why didn't we join hands sooner!

Jesus prays for our unity.

We need to value one another. We need to appreciate each person because we all have gifts and contributions to make. We are not here to compete but to be mutually complementary for the work of ministry. A church that draws on the gifts of a few is doomed to fail.

When Jesus prayed for unity, he was praying for the removal of division. Whatever those divisions may be.

In fact, we are not really that different from the first disciples. Think about it, they had similar issues. For starters, the disciples wore many different professional hats: some were fishermen, Matthew was a tax collector, Judas was an entrepreneur, Philip was a craftsman. They saw the world from different points view. Yet they were one.

Today we speak of 'gender issues', the 'generation gap', of struggles for power . . . whatever. We search out and specialize in things that separate us 'from the herd'; things that make us 'unique'; things that make us 'stand out from the crowd.'

Jesus knows our differences but prays for the **unity of his followers.**

The church today is divided from within. Imagine how many Christian **denominations** there are -- how opposed to each other they are. The bug of division is 'within our own clothing', and that is dangerous. The Bible teaches that we are all ***servants and stewards of the mysteries of God.***

There is only one solution that Jesus prays for. We must bury our differences and live in unity. **Every individual has to be a self-correcting machine** for the sake of unity. Will you be the **twelfth man or woman on the team?**

For us, the Lord Jesus sanctified himself so that we, too, may be truly sanctified. We have been sanctified and separated from the world although we live in the

world. Here on earth we are to remain Jesus' **hands, his feet, his mouth together with others to make him known.**

Jesus extends a simple invitation to you and to me -- **be the twelfth member of God's team.**

The World Council of Churches sought to choose a logo for the organization. It chose a **boat** on the sea with people sitting in it. They were being buffeted by a storm. What a symbol for the global Church. The boat must keep moving amid strong storms and waves. Each member of the Church must contribute to the rhythmic pulling on the oars to avoid the boat capsizing. Each one of us holds an oar but we must work together, as one. Remember, we are in all this together.

Therefore, let us love one another, pray for each other, edify one another, receive one another, honor one another, salute one another with a holy kiss, care for one another. Amen.

Amen!