

“Leading the World to Believe” 5-8-16

Psalms 97

John 17:20-26

In another church I served I wanted to develop an outreach to the community around the church. Saturday meetings were held for training followed by dispersing in teams to knock on doors in order for us to introduce ourselves and get to know the people who lived in our neighborhood.

Ultimately the effort failed. People felt uncomfortable after an occasional rebuke from a neighbor or expressed discomfort in general to the experience. As more negatives outweighed the positives, buy in and interest waned.

For this effort to be successful required the community to work together. There had to be a deeper commitment to the ministry, a willingness to work as a team, and the ability to endure the ups and downs, staying faithful so that the ministry could be sustained.

The desire behind this outreach lay grounded in the hope of putting a face to the faith community in the neighborhood. We wanted to find a way to connect people to Christ and the church. Was it the best method? We all reflected that it was not.

The larger question behind anything that we do as a church to connect with the people around us is this: How do we act and live in such a way that will attract the people around and in our lives to desire to investigate and become part of a faith community? How might the witness of the church bear fruit? How do we reflect Christ through our ministries so that people might see him through us?

Jesus isn't shy about how he sees it. John 17 is Jesus' prayer for the church. It is his passion and vision for what we can be as he places the community before God. The essence of the prayer is that all of us confessing Jesus as the Christ would be one as he and the Father are one. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. 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".

I am sure Jesus understands the long suffering of unanswered prayer. One of the reasons people leave a church is that no one pays attention to them, no one takes time to know them, or invites them to participate in the life of the church. A friend of mine who had joined a former church I served said he left because he realized that he could not break through the social circle of the people who were leaders in the church.

There are other reasons the church fails to reflect Christ's prayer. One blogger reflected on fourteen key reasons for the breakdown of church unity. He noted gossip, actions cloaked in darkness, failure to confront church bullies, self-serving church members, fear of confrontation, low expectations, no church discipline, hypocrisy, fear of losing members, lack of prayer, being known for what the church is against

rather than what it is for, power groups, failure to be evangelistic, and the silent and fearful majority (Homiletics, May-June, 2016, P.21).

We do a pretty good job of sabotaging Jesus' prayer. So did the early church. Read Paul's letters. They reflect our fallen humanity with its corresponding lack of love, and its effects upon the unity and ministry of the church. The New Testament writers direct us to the power of love's actions as we acknowledge the things we do to hurt one another and seek forgiveness. Paul tells the Romans to "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8). Paul encourages us "to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).

This Mother's Day is a reminder of a mother's love which summons a response of love not through power but by sacrifice. And that kind of love is what God demonstrates and wants from us. Jesus' love incorporates that same power reflected in his statement that "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). God's nature is self-giving, appealing to us through sacrificial love.

A parent describes the feeling of helplessness toward a wayward son, saying, "If only I could bring him back, and shelter him and try to show him how much I love him". The parent then says, "The strange thing is, even though he rejects me, Jake's love means more to me than that of my other three, responsible children. Odd, isn't it? That's how love is" (Yancey, "Grace Notes", p.65).

Building unity through Christ's love is difficult work. It requires effort and commitment to live into this prayer of Jesus. I am not sure that we ever arrive because learning to love is a process requiring daily decisions. The question for us is this: Are we willing to work toward becoming the people and church for which Jesus prayed? We certainly don't want to go the way of God's people in the Old Testament whom Frederick Buechner describes as "just like everybody else, only more so" (Yancey, "Grace Notes", p.280).

Jesus is praying for a unity of personal relationship. His union with the Father is one of love and obedience. Our love and unity with each other is grounded in the love and unity between Jesus and the Father. His Spirit leads us into a united purpose which is expressed in a common mission and purpose. Our lives and relationships are interrelated and dependent upon the love between Jesus and the Father

Such love is inclusive, transcending ecclesiastical organizations, creeds, and rituals. We are inclined to love these things more than God or each other. This love Jesus prays for us is a "reflected glory, an angled mirror that reflects God's love to the world through Jesus to us and through us to the world" (Homiletics, p.20).

Jesus prays that the glory the Father gives him will be passed on to us, his followers. To glorify means to make visible the presence of God. The cross is Jesus' glory, making visible the love of God. It is a love cutting across lines, transcending distinctions, dispensing grace. That love driving Jesus is given to him by the Father, "because you loved me from the foundation of the world".

God's love is grounded in the structure of the universe. God designs life to be interrelated, placing us all in an inescapable network of mutuality. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Our glory is wrapped up in Christ's glory, going where he leads us. We witness this interrelatedness when Jesus answers the questions posed to him, recorded in Matthew 25; "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

You remember Jesus' answer? "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me". What happens when we break the chain of those relationships with one another by choices that demean, exploit, discount and even murder another? When we make choices that are unloving and destructive, we are tearing the fabric of our relationships not only with each other, but with God.

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon entitled "A Christmas Sermon on Peace". Reflecting upon God's love revealed in the Christ child, he said, "This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality" (Homiletics, p.23).

How do we lead the world to believe? Jesus put it this way in his prayer; "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 loved me".

The closer we come to Christ, the closer the people around us come to him. It is all interrelated.