

INTRODUCTION

So far in this series of September sermons (now entering October) we have considered praying for **enemies, near ones** (family & friends), **far ones** (the world's distant and needy peoples), and now we consider what it means to pray for **the church**. The NT, especially John's gospel likes to divide all people into two camps: the church and the world. Today, based on Jesus' example, we are thinking about praying for ourselves and for fellow believers—the church.

Read text. Prayer of Illumination.

Story: Phil's **status** at the FAA (contractor, visitor, employee)

Our *status* as members of the Body of Christ mean we no longer belong to the world. The apostle Paul reminds us we are called to be “in the world” but not of it. Indeed, the NT word for “world” (*kosmos*) actually has two meanings.

It can mean the whole world (the cosmos or the entire created order) or it can mean the non-Christian world. This pejorative use of the word “*world*” is meant to distinguish believers and unbelievers, churchd and unchurchd. John's gospel is manifestly evangelistic, aimed at persuading people to believe in Jesus, the word made flesh. John likes to see people leave the world of unbelief and cross over and join the church, the family of true believers. When they believe and belong they gain a new status... Children of God!

Example: baptism as act of joining the church

In order to ask how we might pray for one another as fellow believers, as brothers and sisters in Christ, I have chosen a text that presents Jesus' longest prayer recorded in Scripture. Jesus' best known prayer is, of course, the Lord's Prayer—the our father prayer...

But his longest prayer is recorded in John's gospel, chapter 17. It usually is called Jesus' “*high priestly prayer*.” I call it the Lord's other prayer! He prayed it earnestly before going to the cross. And in this prayer he prayed for his followers *present* and his followers in the *future*. He prayed for Peter, James and John and the others—and he prayed for you and me.

The introductory petition is: “Glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee” (v.1). Glory has two complementary meanings. One, it refers to the **nature** and being of God and second, it denotes the **honor** that ought to be paid to God. Both meanings are captured in Jesus' brief petition. Jesus prays that (1) the Father may glorify the Son (show the world the Son's true nature and being) and (2) that the Son may glorify the Father (bring honor to Him).

In the second petition Jesus makes intercession for his disciples and in the third petition Jesus prays for the church yet to come.

Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

²⁰ I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,
²¹ that they may all be one.

So what is Jesus praying?

Three petitions, three themes.

Protection, unity and sanctification.

For whom? For those the Father gave to the Son.

And not on behalf of the world. Does it seem a little exclusive, a little narrow? I don't think so. There are plenty of other texts in the Bible like "For God so loved the world..." and "God desires that none perish," so we know God's heart beats for all people everywhere.

But in this situation Jesus zeros in on his followers and prays especially for them. Just like you would pray if a loved one is in the hospital or undergoing treatment or awaiting test results or waiting to hear back from college admissions or hoping to hear good news after an interview. Your prayer would focus on the persons or people at hand in a given setting.

So, on the eve of going to the cross, Jesus is concerned for his little band of followers and all who will join the movement. He prays for their protection, for their unity and for their sanctification.

***protection** is for believers who may be persecuted or attacked or slandered for their faith. When the troubles and the trials come from outside you want a layer of protection.

Example: body armor for soldiers

There is a prayer in Ephesians 6 about spiritual armor for the Christian. Do you know about the shield of faith and the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation?

We live in a society so, so different from the first century. We are not persecuted by Jewish leaders or Roman officials. We enjoy religious freedom. It is not this way everywhere. I have friends who have been kicked out of Egypt, China, and other places.

Story: persecution

*the prayer for **unity** is more focused on the internal relations for Christians although storms from without can test the vitality of the fellowship inside the church. I'll come back to this theme.

*the third theme in Jesus' prayer is a concern for consecration or **sanctification**. These religious words means simply to be set apart. They are part of the vocabulary of holiness. To be holy literally means to be set apart. To sanctify is to make holy, or to set apart. Consecrate has essentially the same meaning. It means to associate with the sacred or holy.

This petition is a concern with worldliness. We need protection from the world pressing down on us and we need sanctification so we will not be seduced into liking too much the things of the world. The world's way of thinking and doing business can influence us and affect how we think and do business.

*finally Jesus prays all these things so that the world may believe...

He is praying for the church and not the world. But he prays that the unity and of the church may cause people outside the church, in the world, to believe!

I sometimes like to describe the church as the people of God *for others*. We are the Lord's people. God has set his love upon us. He has saved us from our sins. He has bought us with a price and we no longer are our own. But we are called and set apart not simply for our own benefit but so we can be a light and so we can be salt; so we can be witnesses and draw others to the chief light, Jesus Christ.

Let's go back to that petition Jesus prays about our being **one**. Jesus says that he and the Father are one. He prays that his followers also will enjoy a kind of oneness, a sense of unity.

How well do you think the church, spread out over all the globe and through the ages (20 centuries), has done in achieving and expressing unity? Maybe we still need to pray for that kind of unity.

Early church was Jewish.
Then the Church spread among Gentiles.
It became the official church of the Roman empire.

The church of the east became the Eastern Orthodox Church. And it split officially with the Roman church in 1045.

Then in the late 1400's another major church split occurred. We call it the Protestant Reformation... A little later came the Methodists and then the Baptists. Today there are more than 11,000 denominations.

Being different or denominationally diverse, however, does not mean we cannot experience a kind of spiritual unity with other believers. Of course it starts with recognizing that other kinds of Christians are still Christian even if they do not agree with me.

And, of course, there must be some kind of core beliefs or practices that mark folks as authentically Christian. The first question: what do you believe about Jesus? The first disciples were followers. There was no membership list. No creed to say. But they surely were Jesus people even if they were learning who he was and why he had come.

In this place we are very similar: same neighborhoods and backgrounds; we are all Presbyterians; we belong to the same congregation. Yet we still at times struggle to experience the oneness Jesus envisions we ought to enjoy.

Shall we pray for our unity here at Tuckahoe? Unity is a **gift** from God who transforms us and calls us to live together as brothers and sisters. And unity is a **goal** we work to reach. And unity is an *experience* and a *status* we diligently protect and guard.

Example: marriage counseling (don't criticize family in public)

Holy Communion: our oneness is highlighted by how we partake of the elements. We hold the elements and we wait until all have been served and then we eat together. Today as you eat this bread and drink this cup will you pray for God's people here and throughout the world—that we may be one...

Paul Brand story: