

“A Great Prayer”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
based on the theme, “THE JESUS YOU MEET TODAY”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
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John 17:6-19 [NRSV]

⁶“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. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for 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. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

¹¹And 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. ¹²While 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. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴I 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. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

This passage of Scripture is a great prayer. In fact, it is sometimes referred to as “the Great Priestly prayer of Jesus.” It is called that because it is sometimes interpreted as Jesus praying for his flock the way a priest should. John offers us this complicated and convoluted prayer from Jesus on behalf of his disciples. I almost think it must be authentic in that it seems almost rambling, but I also know John is such a focused theologian that he wanted to be sure to make points that

would relate to his congregation’s situation. Let me try to point this out, by way of our exercise in exegesis, and then try to get to a more central point for our consideration. As important as it is to understand what Jesus was praying about back in John’s day, it is more important that we focus on the Jesus we meet today.

When we try to break down this prayer we can see that Jesus is praying for his disciples before he leaves them.

The other gospels report Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is John's version of that prayer, a very different kind of prayer. In the other prayers it is about Jesus' agony and asking for the cup to pass him by. In this prayer we hear Jesus' concern that we know we are connected with, at one with, God just as Jesus is. He wants us to know he is asking especially on our behalf, not on behalf of the whole world. He wants God to protect us because we are in the world, even though we are not loved by the world. He wants us to have his truth, to be "in the know," which is so important to John because not knowing is the same as not being connected with God. These are the themes that repeat themselves in this prayer. But for me this all swirls around one central verse.

That verse is the one that the United Church of Christ claimed as its motto back at its creation. Back in the late 1950's when the Congregational Christian Church voted to merge with the Evangelical and Reformed Church they voted to make part of John 17:11 our mission statement long before mission statements were in vogue. That snippet of a verse read, "that they may all be one." Jesus is praying that we might all be one as Jesus is one with God.

Now that is a fine sentiment, and one that is certainly worthy as a mission statement. It is in the interpretation that things become complicated. In just what way does Jesus want us to be one? Is this one-ness to be a uniformity of belief and practice? Is it to be a one-ness of thinking and of mission? Even back in the fifties before we had ever heard of culture wars, or thought of being "multi-

cultural and multi-racial," the possibility of all being one must have seemed like a faint and almost hopeless prayer as much as it might now. In today's world where our differences seem far more apparent than ever, how they/we might all become one is a mystery to me.

How can we wrestle with such a universal issue in so short a time? We certainly can't expect to solve this mystery by doing abstract theology. In situations like this maybe it is better to tell a rather small, folksy story. I like those better anyway, don't you?

Minerva Carcano was a Methodist Bishop. She tells this story from her childhood that may help us think about these things. She says, "I was reared on a small farm outside the South Texas town of Edinburg. There was an empty field directly to the east of our farm, in fact just beyond our kitchen window. One day a man bought the field. He had plans to put his cattle there. That did not bother us. What was disconcerting was that he was a Black man. That made him different and we had heard many stories about what Black people were like. Well, my father, being the man of the house, would have to deal with him. There was one big problem, though. My father spoke no English and we soon discovered, as we had expected, that Mr. Johnson spoke no Spanish. My father would just have to figure it out.

"The day Mr. Johnson moved his cattle next door my father went out to meet him across the fence that separated our properties. My siblings and I gathered at the kitchen window to see what would happen. We were amazed at

the sight of my father having a conversation with a Black man who spoke no Spanish.

“When my father returned to the kitchen he reported that Mr. Johnson seemed like a decent man. We were at that point more curious about knowing what my father had said to him and how on earth he had said it to him since he spoke no English. It was the beginning of an interesting and even more, a blessed relationship.

“For the next ten years, Monday through Friday at 5:30 p.m. Mr. Johnson would come to feed his cattle and my father would arrive from his work. They would meet at the fence and visit for a half-hour or so. This monolingual English-speaking independent Baptist, and this monolingual Spanish-speaking Catholic turned Methodist, became friends. Their daily 5:30 afternoon meeting at the fence was a time that these men both cherished for they rarely missed it. We pondered how it was possible.

“The day Mr. Johnson died we went to his funeral. Having always been part of an all Hispanic congregation, I was in awe of what I saw. The church was filled with Blacks, Hispanics and Anglos. The entire town was represented. Many were the lives that this neighbor had touched. How my father and Mr. Johnson had become friends and how we had all come to love that Black man became clear to us in that moment. Friendship and even love were possible in spite of the obvious barriers because Mr. Johnson was a man of God, an incarnation of Christ’s love.”

Minerva goes on to say, “Being ‘one’ as Jesus and God are ‘one’ is not so much about who we are, the language we speak, or the color of our skin, or even where we’ve come from, where we are, or where we would like to go. Being ‘one,’ she says is about you and I embodying the kind of love Jesus taught and modeled for us. She says, this divine love has the power to change the lives of those who believe in it.¹

The change will come if we, as a church, embody this love then we will be one with God as Christ was one with God. If we love others as Christ loves us and loves God then we will be one with those we love as well as with God so we will all be one. I was never good at math and this is getting way too close to an algebraic equation, but I also think it is that simple. To love is to be one in the only ways that matter. It doesn’t take away our individuality, our uniqueness, or our differences, but it makes us one all the same.

The problem is that we think that what makes us different is what makes us better or worse. We think because we are a certain race, or a certain sexual orientation, or a certain political party, or whatever that makes us better or makes someone else worse or vice versa. When will we ever get that it doesn’t make us or them better or worse, it just makes us different, and that doesn’t have to go away for us “all to be one?”

Maybe it would be helpful to use a sports metaphor, since in America sports is a bigger religion than religion. In

¹ Minerva Carcano, “The Evil Among Us,” Day1.org, May 11, 1997.

sports we believe that the better players are worth more than the less skilled players in sports. They even get paid more. After all, in sports the most important cheer is “we’re number one.” So we believe this is true in life, and somehow it even seeps into our religion. We think that somehow, if we have a better faith, a better belief system it makes us better than others. But sometimes, even in sport, we can overcome our “there-can-only-be-one-winner” mentality.²

Joe was the star quarterback of the class A high school football team. Since it was a small school Joe was also president of the senior class, editor for the yearbook, and first trumpet for the marching band. At half time he didn’t go in with the football team, he stayed out and played with the band. Joe’s coach was always preaching how important the whole team was, and how important team unity was. Even the third string tackle was important, said the coach. A lot of the guys would nod and say, “Yeah, yeah,” but Joe really bought into it. In fact, he bought into it enough that he didn’t join in when the football players made fun of the band nerds. He knew they heard and felt bad about the way the jocks made jokes about the non-jocks. He had seen their faces when the big tough guys would laugh at the band geeks or tell jokes about them.

So what did he do? One day he decided to have a party for the band and the football team at his house. He invited everybody, even the water boy from the

team and the third chair tuba player. All the cool, tough jocks couldn’t understand how he could hang out with such a bunch of losers like the band, but Joe told his coach that even the band was important to the football team, because they helped keep the crowd’s spirits up so they would cheer better. The party was a great success and all the band geeks and the jocks even had fun throwing each other into the pool. Joe said to the band director, “Hey, we have to remember everyone’s important, even the last chair flute player – without them the song wouldn’t sound as good, it wouldn’t be as full!” Later in the season his coach said he thought it helped make the team play even more like they were all “one.”

We Christians are not yet one. I know that. It’s going to take some Christians getting over “who’s number one.” It might take partying together more often. It will certainly take a lot more prayer, and a lot more love. But I think it is a great prayer, and I believe it is still the prayer of the Jesus we meet today. AMEN.

² I give credit for the idea for this story to Andrew Greeley, from a story he tells at agreeley.com/hom08/may25_5/25/2008.