

# NEW ONE-NESS

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Sunday, June 2, 2019

Scripture: [John 17:20–26](#)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

Look the Church is a place where we can gather and wrestle with—and appreciate—mystery... so this week, in the season of Easter where we celebrate the risen Jesus... we go back to before the crucifixion. Our reading today comes from the Gospel of John, in what is often called Jesus's farewell address to his disciples. It's a conversation about how they—and we—will continue on when Jesus is not literally sitting across the table from them... or from us. It's meant to give them some words of wisdom before he sees them no more... it is, in short, kind of a commencement speech. "I have been your teacher. I will not be soon. What of me will you carry forward?" It seems to say and ask.

## SERMON

I am not gonna lie, this is not the easiest piece of scripture to wrap your mind around. This is what I sometimes call the 'Holy Turducken.' Did you hear about that crazy recipe a few years back? People started trying to stuff a quail in a chicken in a duck in a turkey... it was salmonella with a side of lemon and rosemary, but people got obsessed, and I think confused about what actually constitutes good poultry... but... anyway...

'As you are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us...' Jesus says. The pronouns get tricky. I think there are two really important parts of this passage of Jesus's time with his disciples for us today.

## Prayer

First things's first, we include this in Jesus's farewell address to his disciples, because there's not some sort of hard line to indicate a new scene, but all of chapter 17 here begins, "...after Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said..." None of this is *to* the disciples in the conventional sense... it's a prayer to God. For the disciples. In front of the disciples.

That's what Jesus is up to today with his friends... after this long address to them, he breaks out in prayer.

It is intimate, and it is serious as all get out. Jesus prays for his disciples, and for all those who will believe because of them... so, for us.

Have you ever had someone pray for you, unprompted, right in front of your face? Have you had someone lay their hands on you and pray for you? How did you feel? An interesting part of the prayer practice of most mainline Christian folks these days, I notice that we mostly pray for people who aren't here with us in the room. Things might get messy.

I think some of this is why the phrase "thoughts and prayers" has become so hollow and so cynical, particularly in times of grief. Prayers are remote... prayers are what you send when you won't send yourself. You need to look no further than the reality that for so many in our culture in these days, and again this week in Virginia Beach, in UNC Charlotte, in Highlands Ranch, Colorado... the culture sends "prayers" [in quotes] to victims of wanton gun violence... it does not send us... it does not send us to be next to the grieving, send us to see their grief, send us to those schools and workplaces

Not here. Jesus is unafraid to pray for his friends, to have them listen in to his closest thoughts with God, his fears, his worries for them... his deepest wishes for them. And have it draw him so closely to their and our pain, our worry, our fear... that God is right there in it with us.

The Tuesday morning book group is currently reading *Beginner's Grace*, by Unitarian Universalist minister Kate Braestrup, on prayer: its practice and its poetry. This has led to important conversations about how on earth praying actually works. Here's a thing I need to say... I don't know. That is to say, I don't know how it works for you, but I have some experience with how it has worked for me, and still does. For others this week, we found it is closer to meditation, for some a giving of energy and attention, for some, it is a way of giving to God (p.s. we also got a little into who God is, for God's sake) those things which are outside of our control.

For me it is indeed a form of attention calling. For me, God doesn't me to send a customer service escalation or something, I trust God is present in those places where my heart is breaking or celebrating with others or with me... But my attention is shifted there in a different way... helping me maybe to see with "the eyes of Christ" in some new way. In other words, I hope that God is present with the hurting... but I hope that God make me more present with the hurting, too.

*Czesław Miłosz answers an imaginary atheist with love, “You ask me how to pray to someone who is not,” he writes. “All I know is that prayer constructs a velvet bridge.” To set foot on that bridge requires not certainty but deep humility. If the other end of the bridge turns out to rest on nothing, well then, walking the bridge together in love shall be a fine and sufficient gift. <sup>[1]</sup>*

## One-ness

The second big thing to notice here is the content of the prayer then. In the United Church of Christ, we do not often memorize scripture, but we might hope you remember John 17:21, since it is the motto of our denomination: “That they may [all] be one.”

What does it mean for us to be “one,” though, in this age of post-modernism, where our kids learn important words like multi-vocal? What does it mean to be one when we are so “many”?

Even more, what does it mean to be one in a time in which we are both more connected than ever but reporting loneliness as an ever increasing scourge in our life and culture. Indeed, that isolation does seem to be playing a part in some of the *real* violence, and in the violence of our words...

Jesus’s prayer is that the love of God that he knows would be known in *us*, his followers, so well... that those who meet us and encounter us cannot help but know that same love of God. That through our one-ness with one another, we will share that love. Not our “same-ness” mind you, but our one-ness... but y’all come back next Sunday, now. That’s a topic for another day.

Nowhere in here does Jesus pray that people will come to know about the doctrine of the trinity (that hasn’t been invented yet), or about the virgin birth, or that people will all become Christians (*they* haven’t been invented yet!) Jesus’s prayer is closer to this...

“I pray that people will know the love of God through these people that I have loved, and how they love others in return.”

We can get it so mixed up. We can get into cultures and practices that seem to indicate that people will know who we are by our credentials, by our productivity, by our health, by our image that we project... We can get into churches that want to say you can measure the Spirit of a place by how many people are in worship, or how many baptisms you have,

The only metric Jesus is praying for is this: when people look at us as the church, as the disciples of Jesus... do they see love that reminds them of the immeasurable and inconceivable love of God?

I think they see that when our prayers take us next to and with the grieving or the rejoicing. I think they see that when our prayers take us next to those who feel alone and who know the deep connection of spirit. I think they see love when... we serve, we weep, we laugh... together.

That they may be one... in love... is how the prayer goes. That everything is love.

“Christ, shield me this day: Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of every person who thinks of me, Christ in the eye that sees me, Christ in the ear that hears me.”

May the world see and hear Christ in us. Amen.

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1. Braestrup, Kate. *Beginner's Grace: Bringing Prayer to Life* (p. 196). Atria Books. Kindle Edition. ↩