

"One in Christ"

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Global Mission Sunday
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Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 61:1-4, 11
New Testament Lesson: John 17, selected verses

Our New Testament lesson for this morning comes from the gospel of John chapter 17, selected verses. As he is sitting with his disciples at the last supper speaking about his suffering and death that is soon to come, after Judas had pushed back from the table and fled into the night to gather a detachment of soldiers to arrest him, we gain perhaps the closest look into the mind and heart of Jesus that we see in the gospels. We're invited into a very intimate space as we take our seat alongside the disciples and listen as Jesus speaks with his Father in prayer. Notice when he says the word, 'they,' he is speaking of his disciples. Hear the Word of God:

“After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed...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...I ask not only on behalf of these, but also 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. 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 have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” Here ends the reading of God’s Word.

I have found myself humbled and immensely grateful for your response to the earthquake in Haiti. In some ways it has mirrored the response of the rest of our global community as we all have watched the same stories unfold and experienced a collective horror and grief over what we have seen. Bodies burning on the streets. The impossible frustration of a bottleneck of international aid while the elderly and vulnerable die of hunger. Children shooting at doctors out of fear and desperation. This week a woman looked into

the camera of a local media affiliate, sobbing. Her two year old daughter's leg had been crushed, and after speaking with the doctor in despair she asked him to let her child die. What does it say about your experience of your country and your life when it seems that the more loving option is to let your child die? Yes, in many ways your response has been similar to the international community as you have witnessed these things and grieved, but there has been something else in your reaction too. Something very different from the rest of the world that has left me as I said humbled and immensely grateful as your mission minister. Streaming in through phone calls, in emails, from conversations in the hall, huddled in prayer groups both spontaneous and planned, and around the city the first question you have asked is, 'How are our friends?' How are our friends in Bayonnais? Though ground zero of the earthquake was in Port au Prince, your hearts have been in the mountains 100 miles away where pastor Actionnel Fleurisma, and 1800 students, and a vibrant worshipping community call home. I was humbled because as a congregation your experience of this tragedy in Haiti is deeply personal. And I am grateful because your instinct has been to urgently, immediately, generously and prayerfully, come alongside our friends in love and that is what we are doing. Through your desire to demonstrate the gospel with your faithfulness, you are enabling our friends to demonstrate the gospel with their faithfulness as they reach out to the suffering who are flooding onto their doorstep even though they are suffering deeply themselves.

A friend of mine shared a political cartoon with me this week that was very disheartening but quite probably very true. It showed a couple sitting on their living room sofa watching the evening news. And the anchorman on the television, a map of Haiti beside him on the screen is saying quote, "Since the earthquake, Haiti has become the epicenter of media attention! But don't worry, it will be invisible again in a year." The critique is appropriate as it is the conditions of poverty and corruption that have been allowed to flourish under Haiti's invisibility that have caused the effects of this earthquake to be compounded and multiplied. But as Christian people seated in the pews on Global Mission Sunday morning this forecast of pending anonymity doesn't sit well with us even if we do recognize a bit of ourselves in it. For us, it's personal. This suffering has a face and a name in the people in Bayonnais. They have come to visit us and we have gone to be with them. They have a ministry to one another and a calling to their community, and it is not so different from our own. It is the relationship that changes things.

In fact, it is the relationship that changes everything. That is what our gospel says. One hundred and eighty degrees from an interest that fades over time is the intimacy that we are called to share with one another in Jesus Christ. We are familiar with the great commission of Christ to 'Go and make disciples of all nations' that we see in the gospel of Matthew. We study the call to love the Lord with all our heart and our neighbors as ourselves. We trace the missionary journeys of Paul across the ancient world but there is something even beyond the sending and the giving that we have to understand as well and that is that at its heart mission is about relationships- with one another, and through one another with Jesus Christ, and through Jesus Christ, with God.

Of all the things that Jesus could pray about on the night of his betrayal, on the eve of his death, listen to what he says, "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...I ask not only on behalf of these (the

disciples), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word (each of us), 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. 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 have loved me.”

In his prayer we see that Jesus is inviting us to join into the great mystery of the trinity, to participate at the deepest level in God’s incarnational mission to the world, and to enjoy at the deepest level intimacy and communion with him. God as Father, Son, and Spirit is intrinsically relational and, Christ says, so are we. It is when we are together that we experience the fullness of divine life in the way that we pour ourselves out for one another for the sake of love. We are invited into the same relationship with God that is enjoyed by Christ through the Spirit- where there is no obstacle of sin, no obstacle of want, no obstacle of death only connection, joy, and love. And we are invited into the same mission of God by doing as he did in Jesus and becoming one with all his people so that they might recognize him in their midst. What we do in mission is firmly grounded in who God is and how God acts out his love for the world in Christ. And our capacity to do it flows not from our abilities but only by the power of the Holy Spirit within.

In many ways this invitation to participate in the divine life that Christ is extending in his call to being one is something that cannot be understood, it is something that can only be experienced. It is one thing to talk about the importance of relationships, it is another thing to be in relationship. Just as it is one thing to talk about the importance of mission in the church, and quite another thing to live it as Jesus did and risk showing each other our wounds, telling each other our stories, going into each others homes, and walking into the most difficult and painful realities of life together. Christ is at work in us and is ministering to others through us, and mission in so many ways is the act of carrying the way that we are being changed by Christ through one another into the world.

On a final morning in Bayonnais as our mission team was packing the bus and loading up for the long trek down the mountain and into Port au Prince, in the midst of the flurry of hugs and tearful goodbyes and big smiles and waves and promises to write and to return, one of the women in our group was laughing and talking with her special new friend- a young girl of perhaps fourteen- that she had made during the course of the week. Special friends always emerge. Prolonging the inevitable climb onto the bus that would carry them worlds apart for as long as she could, it finally came time to give the final hug and tearful goodbye. The last big smile and wave and promise to write and to return. “Goodbye.” She said. “Goodbye,” said the young girl, “I will miss you.” “Oh, I’ll miss you too,” our team member said now turning to go, when she suddenly felt a hand on her arm that grasped her with surprising strength and looked around to see her new young friend staring her soberly and squarely in the eye. “Do not forget my face,” said the girl. “Do not forget my face.” “Her face haunts me.” Our team member has shared since then. “It is burned into my memory and I live with her in my mind every day.”

Dale Mullennix of the Urban Ministry Center says that to make eye contact with someone is to leave a little piece of yourself with them and to take a little piece of them with you. So that when you look into the face of a homeless neighbor, say, and meet a gaze, it is not

so easy to walk away. You are part of each other now and at some innate level, you recognize that you are one. In Haiti they say that if you lay hands on someone who is dying or injured in the street, then you claim responsibility for them because they become a part of you and you can never be the same. Mission is not a program. It is people and faces with names who are part of you. It is the good news by which we are saved revealed in others. It is the hunger for justice that does not allow you to be the same because it's personal. It is the call to risk being the body that takes responsibility for all of its parts where others are walking away. It is the invitation to seek out strangers in the name of Christ that may become friends so that you can enjoy fuller communion with him. And it is to participate in God's mission to the world through incarnation, proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind through your life today simply by showing up and letting the people know that God's love is real.

Following God through the world in this way has taken us in many ways to the ends of the earth. It has brought us into relationships with children and families in the desert of the Yucatan where, for twenty years through Accion Ministries our church members, adults and youth alike, have gone to share the love of Christ and have encountered Christ there in the faces of others in a way that has left them changed. It has compelled us to come alongside a church in Russia for ten years to encourage them as fellow brothers and sisters in the faith as they bear up under persecution and seek to share the love and joy of Jesus Christ to a culture bankrupted by violence, addiction, and despair. It has led us to the side of those families whose homes have been destroyed by hurricanes on the Gulf Coast and need hope in order to rebuild. And through missionaries like Louis and Susan Sutton in Chad Africa and Les and Cindy Morgan in Bangladesh and Larry and Inge Streshley in the Congo and Ellen and Al Smith in Russia and others throughout the years it has led us to come alongside others who feel compelled by the call of unity to carry God's mission of love into the world on our behalf.

“The glory that you have given me I have given them (Jesus said), 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 have loved me.” This prayer that we may be one in Christ is the foundation of what we call the connectional church. We are a body of believers bound together as one, connected by relationships that take us to the ends of the earth. But in striving to embody and emulate God to the world we cannot forget that Global Mission includes mission that spans all the globe and that means mission in our own backyard and home too. The first act of love God shared was in pouring himself out to his own Son to fortify him for the life he would lead on this earth. So too we cannot forget that there are those across town, across Church and Trade Streets, across our dinner table who are searching our faces to see Jesus Christ revealed. Who are also hungry for hope and to experience the incarnation of divine mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and love in their difficult spaces. Who have wounds that need healing and stories to share. Who have painful realities they need accompaniment through. Who are not content that places like Haiti can be the epicenter of attention for a month but invisible again within the year. Who want to know how to respond when they meet the gaze of a neighbor in need and don't know where and how to start to serve. Who are looking to us to see if mission is merely about discretionary giving, or if it is truly about a commitment of our whole selves to the reality that we are

one and as such will do what it takes for the sake of sharing the love and joy and promises of God in Jesus Christ with each and every one in the world.

The minister of my home church when I was growing up, Dr. Walter Jones, just recently published a book about ministry entitled “Light Shining Through.” In it he shares the following. “It was late in the morning on a sizzling July Saturday. (My wife) and the children were gone. In the cool tranquility of the living room I was putting the finishing touches on a sermon when the doorbell rang. Muttering at the interruption, I answered. Standing at the door was an African American woman in her mid-thirties holding the hand of a little girl, perhaps five or six, probably her daughter. In the other hand she was holding something, maybe a booklet. I looked more closely. The Watchtower. Oh no, I thought to myself, Jehovah's Witnesses! I tried making polite conversation but I could feel the cold air rushing out past me through the crack in the door. And I could see that the child was very hot. In a moment of Southern middle-class mannerliness I asked, “Would you like a glass of water?” Unfamiliar with the rules for such exchanges, the youngster said, “Yes.” “Well, then,” I said, stumbling over my words and my feet, “uh, come in.” I fetched the water. We sat and chatted pleasantly enough. Then, thanking me for the drink and wishing me well they were off.

I have reflected now upon that whole episode. This experience makes me something of a Good Samaritan, right? No, sadly, I was merely a priest performing what in my culture is a ritual duty, concerned mostly for my own purity. She was black, and I am white. She may have finished high school, and I have graduate degrees. Her theology is questionable, and mine is impeccably Presbyterian. And yet it is she who rises early on a weekend, bathes and dresses her child, drives across the tracks, parks her car, and walks in the scorching heat down my side of the road to see if I am ok.”¹

Even in our best intentions, how often do we reduce mission to merely the carrying out of a set of ritual duties? But this is not what we are about as a people of faith. And this is not who Christ is calling us to be. To be in mission is to be in relationship as one. We follow a God into the world who gives nothing less than his whole self to this cause and asks his disciples to do nothing less than the same.

Let us pray. Lord we hear you knocking, so give us the courage to invite you in. Help us to proclaim the year of your favor, to respond in faith to your gift of grace in our lives, and by our love make your glory known in all the world. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

¹ Rev. Dr. Walter Jones. *Light Shining Through* (Jones: 2009). P 3.