

“The Other Jesus Prayer”

John 17:20-26

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In studying Scripture it's exciting when we have new insights or surprises that help us see and experience our own lives in different ways. When I read our text today, I was surprised when two songs come to mind, one familiar and one not, that helped me see our text from John in a new way. I've asked Melissa to sing the familiar one. Let's listen.

Jesus loves the little children/All the children of the world/Black and yellow, red and white [red and yellow, black and white]/They are all precious in His sight/
Jesus loves the little children of the world

The other one, from the late 60's, has a bit of an edge to it, that may hit too close to home. It is the Sly & Family Stone Song Everyday people...these are the words that came to my mind...

There is a yellow one that won't/Accept the black one/
that won't accept the red one/That won't accept the white one/
We got to live together...

All the children of the world...we got to live together! Of course, there's nothing new about that, but let's see what our text from John says that is new about it. To do that, we need to start with a verse from the beginning of John. That verse is probably the most familiar verse of the New Testament John 3:16, what is it? Together...“for God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son...” This verse declares God's tremendous love for the world and we know that the world that God loves is diverse, described in the songs as black and white, and in ways that we now recognize as not being politically correct...red and yellow. John's gospel begins with God's universal love, and near the end, on Jesus' last night, we have the “other” Jesus prayer, the less familiar Jesus prayer that shows us how, and why, God's love is to be lived out in the world. Surprisingly, it may not be what we think!

Before we get to those surprises, the fact that there is another Jesus prayer may be a surprise to some. Of course, we're familiar with The Lord's Prayer, most everyone can say it from memory. How about this one? How many of you are surprised to discover this other Jesus prayer? You can see you're not alone. This Jesus' prayer, called Jesus' high priestly prayer, is the whole seventeenth chapter of John, and is full of surprises as well as being another model for us in how to pray. Not one we would memorize necessarily, but one we can imitate.

The first surprise in this “other” Jesus' prayer is that Jesus first prays for himself. Now this may seem a little odd to us, as Jesus was one to usually put others first. But remember it's the night before his crucifixion and with the disciples as witnesses Jesus prays, not like he did in the Garden another time when he prayed for himself, that God remove the cup from him; in this prayer, Jesus prays that God would glorify him. If we are to copy this prayer, surprisingly it gives us permission, so to speak, to pray for ourselves first. But in copying Jesus' prayer, our prayer would first be that God would be glorified, honored in our lives. This kind of prayer is

one that can be challenging. In the facing of our tomorrows, we pray for help, we pray for guidance, but many of us don't often pray that God would be glorified and honored in us and through us no matter what we face. Granted none of us have to face what Jesus did but that's the point, isn't it? If Jesus could pray this before his crucifixion, isn't that a guide for us to pray it before whatever our days' may bring?

The second surprise comes when Jesus prays for his disciples, the ones around the table...the ones who would remain in the world after his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. Of all the things that Jesus could have prayed for them, Jesus prays that they would be protected from the evil one, which makes sense; and that God would make them holy in God's truth, that makes less sense. We might expect a prayer for comfort and faith at that time, recognizing that the disciples were going to face a time of trial like none before and none since, but there is a model here for us... Jesus prays for their holiness.

Now we may or may not pray for those around our tables...but the specifics of Jesus' prayer for those around his table, "protection from the evil one and that God would make them holy in God's truth," those prayers probably aren't the most prominent prayers we offer for others. Prayers for comfort, healing, help, faith; yes, those are more common. I don't believe God is saying not to pray for those other things but perhaps this prayer is for us to include something we wouldn't have thought of in praying for others: protection from "evil," however you define that...and that God would make our loved ones holy, sacred in God's truth.

The third surprise in this other Jesus prayer is that Jesus prayed for us! Jesus prayed, "I ask not only on behalf of these, [those disciples gathered around the table] but also on the behalf of those who will believe in me through their word [that would be the believers of all time...including us!]" Jesus prayed for us...but what did he pray? Jesus prays... "that they may all be one!" That we may all be one! And then, in his prayer, Jesus gives two main reasons why! First, that in the believers of all time, in their...in our "oneness"/unity the world may know that God sent Jesus. And the second reason, that the world may know that God loves them...loves us, the believers of all time, even as God loves Jesus.

This is surprising perspective, isn't it? Different than what we usually think about when we are discussing living in unity...living as the body of Christ. Usually, we think about our own harmony/peace...how our lives together might be enriched through our "oneness" as the children of God. Here, Jesus is saying something else. The goal here isn't our oneness...our unity: the goal, the purpose of the prayer is that our oneness/unity would be a way that the world will know God! That's the goal...the purpose! Our "oneness/unity" is a way that the world will know that God sent the Son into the world and that God who sent the Son loves the believers of his Son as God loves the Son himself! This prayer here isn't for our sake primarily, but for the worlds,' as witnesses to God's love for them...just as John's gospel said in the beginning, "for God so loved the world..."

Jesus prayed this for us, the disciples of all time, for the sake of the world. But we're not there yet ~ in our societies or in our churches! We're not one...we don't have unity! So, what gets in our way? Frankly, we're not colorblind! And I'm not just speaking of the color of our skin, but all that colors our lives! Certainly, the color of skin and cultures separates us through

our experiences, prejudices and fears. Through political parties, red and blue and green...our unity gets fractured in big and small ways! I believe that the political climate in the election of 2010 may be very heated... that's why I'm writing a curriculum for a fall class called, "Beyond Politics, Biblical Perspectives on Party Wars." The question is and will continue to be, how do we as people of faith witness to what unites us rather than what divides us? Do we promote a political agenda no matter what that may do to our witness to the world of our unity...or do we avoid tough topics like politics altogether...I don't believe it has to be black or white...through the ranges of grey different colors will be seen. But this means an intentional tending of the tensions...and a willingness to be taught as well as to teach. Just this week a wise man here at Covenant challenged me to consider the divisions I could be perpetuating in statements like, "progressive liberals"...why not, "progressive conservatives," he asked?

And we know it's not just politics. We have a colorful approach to issues of faith as well, both theological and ecclesiastical. Churches lives are colored with discussions on controversial topics that include the profound to the mundane; small and large. The small ones can include... "We've never done it that way before..." The big ones include...money to missions or money in good stewardship of the building. Another big one that I first had conversations about twenty-five years ago, when I was a worship and preaching major at Princeton Seminary was: how we worship.

The main teams here are traditional verses contemporary; let's say the colors are yellow and red. We realized then, 25 years ago, that the mainline churches would struggle with retaining their membership, would struggle with what it means to honor our heritage and to share our faith in our contemporary context. Our reformed motto of "once reformed, always reforming" would be challenged because change is hard. The results on that keep changing as our context changes...and each church is different.

Here at Covenant we have embraced a blended style of worship...some Sundays we have the organ, chancel choir and traditional hymns; other Sundays we have the band and contemporary hymns. Some Sundays we have the band with traditional hymns and other Sundays we have the organ with contemporary hymns. And the blending goes beyond music styles, we hear the word preached in variety of ways, sermons that are didactic like this one, expository, narrative and even puppet scripts, all blending together over the course of a year to make us a vibrant orange, which we celebrate as the Holy Spirit in our midst!

This blending of the red and yellow, traditional and contemporary worship styles will continue in the life of a vibrant church as opportunities present new possibilities as well as challenge: giving us tangible ways to live our motto, "once reformed, always reforming!" Several months ago, a retired Covenant member brought an idea from a Presbyterian church he attended in Florida of a permanent projection system for our sanctuary to a staff person. We knew this idea had a history here at Covenant, but maybe it was time to look at it again. The idea went to three committees, confirmed by them, and approved by Session for our wish list. It appeared on the wish list in the May Caravan. Some items stay on the wish list for years; to our surprise; this one was met in a month!

Last Monday, another retired member, generously gave \$26,000 adding to the youth's contribution of \$1700; this covers the projected cost. This multigenerational support is exciting! But, of course, there are tensions to tend! Some will be uncomfortable with this new idea and others believe it has taken far too long! Some are content with our temporary projection system, and for others that one is difficult and clumsy to use. Permanent projection systems in churches aren't new, but some may be wary of how our system will be used, so that it's not distracting to worship but enhancing. So now we have the first educational piece of how such a screen will be used here at Covenant to enrich and enhance our worship.

First and foremost, the purpose of worship here at Covenant is to worship God. And the screen will be used to augment that purpose! We all know that our society has become much more visual. We hope this visual aid will help us reach out and welcome others to share our ministry and mission as a way to help us grow as a church as well as enhancing and enriching the worship for our community that gathers here regularly. Our theology is not changing; our expression of worship is broadening to reflect more colorful light. The screen will not be the primary focus but rather a way to give visuals to our mission updates, sermon illustrations, and to our hymns if appropriate. Other examples of how the screen could be used, would be as a changeable banner and a visual in the prayers of the people. Our liturgist could invite us, and they often do, to pray for the world and then pictures of the world and world situations could be displayed and all of us, each in our own ways can pray for the world God loves. Witnessing as people of faith to what unites us...witnessing to what Jesus prayed, that through us the world would know God.

We've briefly looked at our palette of colors through the spectacles of society, politics and church life. There is one more...it's the spectrum of color in the human personality. There are lots of personality assessment tools; there is a popular one that summarizes our uniqueness by taking information and then identifying an individual with one of four colors in an attempt to build unity within groups. The colors are red, adventure. Blue, harmony. Yellow, responsibility and Green, curiosity. The thought is that if we can understand and appreciate where a person is generally coming from, we will live and work together in a more respectful, unifying way. Imagine if the world was all adventurers...where would the responsibilities fall? Or if the world was made up of only the curious...where would the harmony be? Sounds a bit like Paul's, "if all were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be." I'm sure Jesus did not consider color assessment when he prayed that we would all be one...but we can see how much we human beings are still striving to live in community...and we as people of faith are to do so even more than the world because we through our oneness, our unity we make God known to the world.

It's no surprise that what we do makes a difference: in society, in politics, in church and in all our relationships with others. Jesus prayed that we would make a difference; that through us, in all areas of our life including, society, politics, church and all our relationships, through our unity, Jesus prayed; the world would know God. One pastor said about this prayer of Jesus, "these verses are a reminder that the character of the community is, perhaps, its greatest witness."¹ What is our character? How do we each contribute to that character? Does the world know God through us? Do we accept one another or just tolerate others? Do we see things from others' perspectives or do we insist on our own way? Are we open to the transforming of our hearts, minds and lives to be the living prayer of Christ?

The yellow one must accept the black one, who must accept the red one, who must accept the white one; for red and yellow, black and white all are precious in God's sight...we have to live together...that was Jesus prayer for us, and together through the prism of Christ's light, our true colors will reflect God's love. Amen!

1. Reverend Holly Hearon