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Unity in Christ
John 17:1-11, 20-23

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,
2 since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.

3 And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

4 I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.

5 So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

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.

7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;

8 for 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.

9 I 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.

10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

11 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,

21 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.

22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,

23 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.

The **context** of these words is important.

Like much of John's Gospel it's happening on **Jesus' last night** before the crucifixion.

Jesus had a lot to say to them that night.

We all know how important last words are.

I remember watching a movie years ago about a dying man with a pregnant wife, and the two decided to make a video about their lives, and love—it was a gift for their child.

Last words are important.

Jesus has told them to stay together, and close to Him and our heavenly father.

He has told them his new commandment for them, to love one another as he loves them,

to even lay their lives down for one another.

He has told them about the Holy Spirit.

And now in John 17 he is **praying** for them.

The Gospel of John **does not include** Jesus' teaching of the Lord's Prayer.

Instead this is the main prayer of Jesus in John's Gospel.

And it is a prayer with one particular focus: **unity**.

You can hear Jesus say it several times in the whole prayer—

that they may be one, as we are one.

Jesus wants us to have true unity,

just like the unity of the Trinity!

Talk about something that **the church and the world really need** today!

Aren't we **more divided** today than any other time in recent memory?

A bitter election and constant political news and scandal, have divided our country, and our leaders—near and far.

The rhetoric often grows hateful, and encourages more division, not the unity or community that we so desperately need!

And, we live in an ever-changing world full of **technology and mobility**.

Families and employees move a lot,

loved ones are often separated from each other by hundreds of miles.

Mine is no different—siblings in New York, and Dallas.

Ed's family is in New Jersey.

The technology and social media has **brought us together**, in many ways.

It's neat to connect online with not only your family,
but also long lost friends and acquaintances.

I know all five of us siblings use group texts all the time to update on what's
going on in our lives.

We also skype, conference call, email, and use FB to keep up and share news
and pics. It's a gift in many ways.

How else would I see my nieces in the Bronx growing up?

Hasn't it blessed your life in some ways?

But isn't there a **dark side** to it all?

It doesn't just bring us together,
it also ironically **isolates** us like never before.

We tend to sit alone in our own homes and offices,
and spend more time online connecting than we do with real people.

People are **so lonely** today.

Dr. Richard S. Schwartz, a Cambridge psychiatrist has studied the problem in
America, and notes that over four decades,

studies have shown the devastating consequences of loneliness. ...

increased risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, the progression of

Alzheimer's. One study found that it can be as much of a long-term risk factor
as smoking!

Billy Baker, ["The Biggest Threat Facing Middle-Aged Men Isn't Smoking Or Obesity. It's Loneliness."](#)
Boston Globe (3/9/2017)

What about your neighbors in your neighborhood? Do you know them?

Most of us don't since technology has exploded.

We're too busy inside online to get outside and greet the people who live right
beside us. One of the only ways we've **met neighbors** around us is when Ed
runs a call at their home through the fire department,
and that's not usually a pleasant experience!

Our society has **lost a sense of community and hospitality**.

I think that's why my family has so mourned the loss of our matriarch last
year, my Grandma Morene—because she ALWAYS had a houseful of people
just stopping by to talk and eat.

Last year there was a heartwarming story that went viral, about a woman dialing the **wrong phone number at Thanksgiving**, and showing hospitality.

People loved it because we are so isolated,

and it's so unusual to see people reach out to strangers.

Wanda Dench texted a number that had originally been her grandson's, inviting him over for Thanksgiving.

Instead of going to her grandson, it went to Jamal Hinton.

The two figured out the mistake, but Jamal asked if it was possible to "still get a plate." In grandmotherly fashion, Dench responded, "Of course you can.

That's what grandmas do." Later the young man said, "I'm thankful for all the nice people in the world. I never met her ... and she welcomed me into her house, so that shows me how great of a person she is."

"Woman Shares Thanksgiving with Teen She Accidentally Invited," Yahoo News, 11-25-16

Even in church we are often disconnected.

Do you know the folks who sit beside you in church?

Have you ever called them, or reached out personally?

What about sharing a meal?

Or serving alongside one another?

All too often we are focused on getting ourselves to the church for worship, or another event, and we're focused on *what do I get* from this experience?

Instead of thinking how we might build community, much less how we can have real unity like Jesus describes here.

Unity is **desperately needed in the church and the world**, which is why Jesus prays for unity for all who follow Him, and all who will come after Him.

So, how do we get unity?

Well, we usually try to get everyone to think the same way.

We think unity means **we agree** on things, especially things like doctrine and worship, and sometimes on politics and social issues.

Christians often try to get **everyone on the same page** with all of that, and use it to build unity.

But you know **what happens** when we do that?

Most of the time, it ***creates more division***, and hostility between the different groups.

Just think about all the ***denominations***, and sub denominations!

Each tradition has their own set of ***rules and expectations***.

The Presbyterians have a Book of Confessions and a Book of Order that outlines our standard practices.

Most mainline denominations have similar sets of guidelines, and so do most other denominations.

Even non-denominational churches have certain expectations of their members and leaders—for example, you might have to be male, or never divorced, or baptized in that church...and the list goes on.

We're human, so when we hear Jesus call us to unity, ***we try to create it ourselves*** by trying to get everyone to agree.

What if there is ***another way***?

What if there are ***clues to finding unity***, right here in Jesus' prayer?

Listen to verse **3** *And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

Do you know what the word ***know*** means in Greek?

It is deeper than just head knowledge,

To know describes ***intimacy and relationship***.

To know Jesus is to have a relationship with Him.

That is the very definition of eternal life—Isn't that amazing?

Reminds us that the kingdom Jesus preached about starts now, not after we die.

This idea of having a ***personal relationship*** with Jesus is not new to John's Gospel, it's all throughout its pages.

When you read the Gospel of John, you discover that we were made for a close relationship with God!

So when Jesus asks for God to ***unify us***, It comes from this idea of ***relationship***.

And ***what is key*** to any great relationship?

Well, at the risk of sounding trite,

what if unity can all be summed up in one word: **LOVE**.

The whole prayer in John 17 is describing the love between Father and Son, the love of God for us, the love of us for God and one another.

What if **love is the only way** to have real unity?

Jesus told his disciples this in John 13, when he gave the new commandment.

And in John 17:22-23 he says: **22** *The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,*

23 *I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me...*

What if love is the key to unity?

How would we **foster** that kind of love?

It certainly doesn't just come naturally for any of us.

We are fallen, imperfect human beings who are much more selfish than we'd like to admit.

What if the love we need **comes from our relationship with God?**

What if it **flows out of that** primary relationship, like water flowing through a river?

Do you want to love people more?

What if we **start by loving God** even more, and let the love flow from there?

Sounds so elementary, but we forget that God is the source of all the love!

If we want to have more love, more unity,

We need a better relationship with God!

More time in prayer, Bible study, fellowship, service, giving, and worship!

And what if we realized that

Christian faith is never meant to be lived alone—

we can't be a Lone Ranger Christian—we need each other!

Our faith is connected to our community!

The love we have for God is connected to our love of neighbor.

Jesus said it in the Great Commandment:

to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

That's actually our church's mission statement now.

It's all about *love*.

Jesus says in his prayer that we are called to have the *same love relationship with God* as Jesus has with God. And when Jesus describes that love relationship in the Trinity, he uses the word *give* 17 times and *glorify* 5 times!

What if *giving of ourselves and our resources* is a direct line to building our relationship with God and each other? What if *praising God*, thanking God for our blessings, is directly connected to how much we love each other? Ever thought about those connections?

How can we *better love people in this church*? What about being real, asking questions that matter, sharing stories and being more transparent? I know the prayer group here relies upon that kind of personal sharing to keep us close and dedicated in prayer! The Wednesday Bible study has that unity and community—which only helps us learn more about God and the Bible!

Can't we all do a better job of loving our church family? There are a dozen ways to do this—calls, cards, visits, eating, serving.

And what about *loving our community? Our world?* The neighbors outside of these walls? How do we actually do that?

The writer G. K. Chesterton once said,
*"We make our friends; we make our enemies,
 but God makes our next door neighbor. ...
 We have to love our neighbor because he is there."*
 The nearness of our neighbor is providential,
 as God never gets the address wrong.
 Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered* (Crown & Covenant Publications, 2015).

What if that love of our neighbors *starts with simple kindness* and acknowledging people as people? Lance Ford and Brad Briscoe wrote a book about loving neighbors,

called *Next Door As It Is in Heaven*.

In that book, the authors talk about the **profound loneliness** people are regularly experiencing, and the sense that they have very little value at all. Unfortunately, many of us contribute to this loneliness and lack of self-worth as we move throughout our day, rarely even lifting our heads to offer a simple greeting to the people we meet.

Not so with the tribes of northern Natal in South Africa:

The most common greeting, equivalent to "hello" in English, is *Sawu bona*. It literally means, "I see you."

If you are a member of the tribe, you might reply by saying *Sikhona*, "I am here." The order of the exchange is important: until you see me, I do not exist. It's as if, when you see me, you bring me into existence.

This reveals a **deep truth**. "*When we merely move throughout our days without seeing people as people, then as far as it matters to us in that moment, they really don't exist. ... [But] being conscious of how we approach people we encounter through the normal routines of our day is a step toward bringing ... heaven here on our patch of earth.*"

Lance Ford & Brad Briscoe, *Next Door As It Is In Heaven*, (NavPress, 2016), page 76

And what about **opening our homes**?

I used to visit people in their homes more than today.

Today many do not want me to come to their homes.

We are too worried about the mess and stress.

But what if we did open our homes more often?

In her book ***Openness Unhindered***, Rosaria Butterfield reminds us that the point of hospitality in the home is fellowship, not entertainment.

Butterfield writes:

"Don't let pride stop you from opening your home. Ignore the cat hair on the couch (or in the mac and cheese). It likely won't kill anyone as decisively as loneliness will. Add as much water to the pot to stretch the soup. If you run out of food, make pancakes, and put the kids in charge of making that meal. See how much fun that is.

And know that someone is spared from another humiliating fall into internet pornography because he is instead walking with you ... Know that someone is spared the fear and darkness of depression because she is needed at your house, ... Know that someone is drawn into Christ's love ..."

Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered* (Crown & Covenant Publications, 2015)

Loving our neighbor also happens through the different missions and ministries of this church.

All of them are about loving your neighbor.

The Youth Café, our connection to Mills elementary,
Meals on Wheels...

We experience more unity when we are giving, serving, reaching out, right?

So often people in the world look at the church and all its flaws,
and they are especially critical of our fights and divisions.

When we are not one, we are not a good witness.

But when we have that real love of God and neighbor—

When that brings us together,

That is an ***incredible statement*** to our community and our world.

That's something that ***draws people*** to this community of faith,
and to Jesus Christ.

Loving God and neighbor means that what Jesus taught his disciples is still
true today.

They will know we are Christians by our love,
just as we sang today.

Love for each other, and the unity that comes from such love,
that is the ***best thing we can share*** with a world in need of Christ.

What if they knew us by our love?

What if they knew ***we are united by our love*** for each other?

Despite our differences?

What if our ***unity was a model*** for our community?

It's a ***strength of this church*** that we have people under this roof,
loving and serving together in the name of Jesus,
even though we have differing opinions on politics and social issues,
even on issues of theology!

We are not of the same mind, but we are of the ***same heart***.

It's the love of God and neighbor that keeps us together.

What if *Jesus' prayer for unity were our prayer?*
That we may be one.

Friends, hear the *Good News of the Gospel:*
We are called to *unity*.
And that unity comes from *love*.
Loving God, and loving neighbor.
May the love flow through us and bring us together. Amen.