

THE LORD'S UNANSWERED PRAYER

John 17:20-23

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One of the side effects of building renovation has been frequent false fire alarms. I can't tell you how many times in the last month that I've had appointments interrupted and meetings delayed while the Brentwood Fire Department responded to a fire alarm in our building. Fortunately none have occurred during worship. One fire fighter who is a member of this congregation said to me recently, "Look, Howard, if you are lonely at church during the week, just give us a phone call; we'll be glad to come visit you without having to bring all our fire equipment."

As I was standing on the parking lot at 7:30 the other morning, waiting for the fire department to clear the building so we could return to it, I remembered one of my favorite stories about churches and fires.

At a large ecumenical gathering of religious leaders the fire alarm sounded. The Methodists gathered in a corner and prayed while the Baptists yelled "Where's the water?" The Quakers quietly praised God for the blessing fire brings while the Lutherans posted a notice on the door declaring fire to be evil. Catholics took pledges to cover the expenses. Christian Scientists agreed among themselves there really was no fire at all. The Pentecostals praised God and shouted "holy smoke." Presbyterians appointed a committee to look into the matter and make a formal report at their next session meeting. In the meantime, the Episcopalians formed a procession and marched out of the building in decency and order.

It's World Wide Communion Sunday. Christians around the world will bow in elaborate cathedrals and open air meetings to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. Yet the body of Christ remains so divided that I as a minister of the gospel would not be allowed to participate in many of these Holy meals. And that's what I would like to talk about today.

CHRISTIAN UNITY IS AN ANSWER TO PRAYER

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he not only instituted the Lord's Supper, but he prayed. John 17 records that prayer. It is really the Lord's Prayer in John 17. It is the prayer that the Lord himself prayed. In it He prayed for Himself asking that His life may be glorified. He prayed for his disciples asking that they be protected in the kind of task that was lying before them. Then Jesus prayed for you and me. He prayed for all who will come to believe in His name in the years and centuries to come. He prayed for us. Jesus remembers us in prayer.

For years I was sustained in ministry by the knowledge that my mother's prayers were following me. After she died, others stepped up to the plate. I have been the recipient of people's prayers around the world. I'm not sure that I can explain

the full impact of that fact, the power of intercessory prayer, the value of other people holding you by name before the Lord. The intercessory prayers of people lift us, encourage us, help us, heal us.

Even better news for you today is that someone even greater than your closest friend and your family is praying for you. The Lord himself is praying for you. Never a burden that He does not carry. Never a sorrow that He does not share. On his way to the cross, Jesus remembered us. He prayed for you and me. We are still on His mind and in His heart. Jesus is praying for you.

Here is what He asked. He prayed that we would become one in heart and mind. Look at what He says. *The goal is for all of them to become one heart and one mind.* He prayed for unity in the Church. He prayed that divided selves would find a singleness of purpose. He prayed that divided believers would become united. He prayed a divided world would find peace. I wonder how long the Lord's Prayer will go unanswered in our lives? The union for which Jesus prays is a Spiritual Union.

I've spent a lot of time in my ministry working toward organizational and administrative mergers. Many of you in business know what I'm talking about. Whether in church or business, merging structures is not the same as uniting people. We should never organize our churches the same. We don't need to. We need never worship in the same style. We don't need to do that. We will never believe exactly and precisely the same thing. Nor should we. Unity is not uniformity. There must be diversity in our unity or we will all die of boredom.

But here is the clue. Unity is not something we achieve. Unity is something we receive. It is not organized by the Church but generated by the Spirit of God. It is an answer to prayer. And that's why churches that pray a lot are usually united in mission and heart. It is more natural for people to fall out and fight than to unite. It is more human for people to fly apart than to pull together. Fears and doubts separate us. They'll know we are Christian by our love. Make us one, Lord, Make us one. Holy Spirit, make us one.

CHRISTIAN UNITY IS A REFLECTION OF THE TRINITY

Look at the text a little further. *So they might be one in heart and one mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me. And the same glory you gave me, I gave them. So they'll be as unified and together as we are—I in them and you in me.*" If that sounds like Greek, that's what it is. Jews, Muslims, and Christians are all monotheistic religions. We believe in one God. When Jews express their belief they say, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one," and the first commandment of the Judeo-Christian tradition is "You shall have no other god's before me." Jews are monotheistic. When Muslims express their faith they say, "Truly our God is one, Allah is his name." When Christians affirm their faith we say, "We believe in one God who is revealed to us through the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God in three persons blessed Trinity."

Let me be very quick to say, the concept of the Trinity developed in the third and fourth centuries is more than I can comprehend. I like that little jingle that came from about the fourth century:

We surmise that God's a community,
Three persons in a single unity.
But how can it be? We simply cannot see.
We can only revere the mystery.

The Trinity suggests that relationship is at the heart of God. God is himself a relationship, a community in which there is spiritual unity. Mutuality, intimacy, reciprocity, love are definitions of this unique unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus prays that you and I as a church will be as unified as the Trinity. *"Just as you, Father, are one in me and I in you, so might they be one heart and mind with us."*

Just a $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$, so may Protestants and Catholics, liberals and conservatives, Anglos and Hispanics find their common denominator in Christ who makes us one. The Trinity is our example of unity. Make us one, Lord, make us one. Holy Spirit, make us one.

CHRISTIAN UNITY IS A WITNESS TO THE WORLD

"Then they'll be mature in this oneness, and give the godless world evidence that you've sent me and loved them in the same way you've loved me."

I asked a young man recently to tell me his religious history, a question I often ask when seeking to understand the spiritual dynamics of another. "Well," he said, "my family and I were very active in a church until I was in junior high school. Somehow there was a big church fight and our family left. We stopped going to church. We visited around a little, but we never really settled into another congregation. As an adult I have just drifted here and there. But I never really found a home, a place that is mine."

Every time I hear a story like this I shudder. I tremble. I'm worried. Is somebody lost because some church somewhere found themselves in a conflict and a young person lost his way? Are there people outside the kingdom because of me some place along the way? Unity is a witness to the world and the world will call the Church hypocritical until it finds the ability to love each other in an unusual and Christian kind of way. The purpose of oneness is witness.

Jim Cymbala is the pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle Church, a dynamic church in New York City. He started out with about 10 people and now there are over 6,000 people there. For 20 years now, Jim has been saying to every group of new members "Now I charge you that if you ever hear another member speak an unkind word of criticism, or slander against anyone—myself, an usher, a choir member, anyone else—stop that person in mid-sentence and say 'Excuse me, who hurt you? Who slighted you? Let's go get it straightened out right now,' so God

can restore peace and harmony to this body.” Is it any wonder that he has 6,000 people in his church now? God honors that kind of unity of spirit. God honors that kind of witness to the world.

United Methodists have a particular witness to make to Christianity in our day and time, particularly when it comes to Holy Communion and the stance that we make at this table. We have something to say to the world that the world needs to hear. For whosoever will may come to this Table. You who are tossed about with many conflicts and multiple doubts—you come, the Table is set for you. You who feel confused by life, excluded and shunned—you come, come to the Table. You who are not Methodists and don’t ever want to be a Methodist—you come, the Table is set for you. Let the children come, for the kingdom of God requires childlikeness for us all. You who are here for the first time or every time. Sunday Dinner is prepared for you.

Theologian Jurgen Moltman says, “The Lord’s Supper is not the place to practice discipline. The Lord’s Supper happens by invitation, which is as open as the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross. Because He died for the reconciliation of the world, the world is invited to reconciliation in the Supper.” You who are estranged and separated, and lost, come to the Table, the Table is set for you.

Make us one, Lord, make us one.
Holy Spirit make us one.
Let your love flow
So the whole world will know
We are one in you!

Amen.

