

"So That the World May Know"

"... that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

The Parker family was busy preparing Thanksgiving dinner when a loud crash echoed through the house. Everyone rushed into the kitchen to discover the source of the sound; and when they saw it, they were all filled with shock and sadness. It was the crystal bowl that their great-grandparents had brought over from Europe, a bowl that had been on the family dinner table for generations. The sight of it lying on the kitchen floor shattered into pieces brought cries of sadness and gasps of disbelief; it was almost unimaginable to have a family dinner without this treasured heirloom. Uncle Bob was about to get the broom and dustpan to sweep up the remains when he was interrupted by Jessie, who stood over the broken pieces of the bowl and announced that "we can't throw it out – it has to be fixed! We can't have dinner without our family bowl!"

Uncle Bob put the broom away, and soon the family gathered around the table in the den with bottles of glue and the shattered pieces of the bowl. It was something like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle; the pieces were spread out on the table and family members had to figure out where each piece fit. Dinner was delayed for several hours and the family focused on piecing together the bowl without which a family dinner was unimaginable. Finally, the last piece was glued onto the bowl, and the fragile heirloom took its rightful place as the family sat down to a most memorable Thanksgiving feast. While the bowl bore the scars of its brokenness, its place in the Parker family remained important, and at every subsequent meal the once-shattered bowl bore the fruits of the family meal to everyone who gathered together at the family table.

In his final hours with his disciples, our Lord Jesus gathers at the table to share his Last Supper. In John's Gospel, this last meal takes the form of an extended Farewell Discourse in which Jesus offers instruction and encouragement for those who will carry on his mission and ministry after his departure. Jesus has offered his disciples words of consolation that they should not *"let your hearts be troubled [because] in my Father's house there are many dwelling places ... [and] I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."* (14:1-3). Jesus reassures them that even though he must depart he will not leave his followers orphaned, but will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit who *"abides with you, and he will be in you."* (14:17). Jesus comforts his disciples with the assurance that *"you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn to joy."* (16:20). Jesus offers these farewell words to those who will bear his message to the world *"so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"* (16:33).

Today's Gospel lesson is a section of Jesus' prayer that marks the final scene of his farewell meal with his disciples. By concluding his narrative of the farewell with this prayer, John is adhering to the conventions of the farewell genre that was familiar to readers of the Hebrew Scriptures (such as Moses' farewell at the end of Deuteronomy). The farewell prayer was *"well-documented in the religious literature of the ancient Mediterranean world and would have been a familiar genre to the first readers of the Gospel."* (Gail O'Day). On the verge of willingly laying down his life and thus completing God's work, *"Jesus prays in the confidence of the eschatological victory of his hour, and the temporal perspective of his prayer is governed by that eschatological reality."*

In this final section of the prayer, Jesus expands the circle for whom he prays from those who took on his work in the world (“*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.*” – 17:11) to those who will come to believe through that work. Jesus turns his attention to the world and expresses his desire that the world will come to share in the knowledge of God that marks the life of the faith community; he prays “*not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word*” (17:20). At the heart of this prayer is Jesus’ desire for the unity of the faith community, “*that they may all be one*” (17:21). With this request, Jesus prays that those who come to believe in him will share in the same communal identity as those who brought them to faith. This unity for which Jesus prays is not intrinsic to the community itself, but derives from the essential unity of the Father and Son that has been a theme throughout the Fourth Gospel:

- “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.” – 14:10.
- “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” – 14:20.

Jesus’ words about the community’s oneness never stand apart from his affirmation of the unity of Father and Son; “*there is no ‘one’ for the community without the ‘we’ of Father and Son.*” (O’Day).

As important as unity is for the community of disciples, this unity does not exist for itself or for the community; the purpose of the community’s oneness is to offer a witness to the world about the revelation of God in Jesus. The unity of the faith community exists “*so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*” Jesus prays that through the community’s unity, the world will come to believe what the community already believes: that Jesus is the one whom God has sent.

- “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” – 3:17.
- “The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me.” – 5:36.
- “And whoever sees me sees him who sent me ... for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak.” – 12:45, 49.

As God’s “glory” (*doxa*) has been fully made known in Jesus (“*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, as we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*” – 1:14), this glory will also mark the life of the faith community. The community will be able to undertake this work because of the glory Jesus has given them: “*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.*” (17:22-23). The community’s oneness, like the incarnation itself, makes visible and tangible the love of God.

- “Jesus’ prayer reminds us that our unity, our ‘oneness’ is to be a sign to the world of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. Oneness and unity is about love ... the mystery of the incarnation is that God desired unity with us so much God became one of us. And at that moment we are drawn into the oneness of God, the Creator ... the Son, and the Spirit. It is with God’s help that we can live into that oneness.” – Lucy Lind Hogan.

In the closing verses of his prayer, Jesus employs the language of volition instead of petition, stating what “I want” instead of asking for God to fulfill his requests. But Jesus is not seeking to do his own will, but the

Will of God; he prays “*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.*” (17:24). Far from being audacious or inappropriate, the language of volition “underscores the confidence with which Jesus speaks to God and anticipates God’s response.” (O’Day). It is Jesus’ desire that the love of God for Jesus, the love of the Father for the Son, will continue in the life of the faith community, and through this love Jesus will also be present in the community. The community will become the incarnation of God’s love for the world, just as the incarnate Word that was present among them in Jesus was that blessed presence.

- “This prayer points the faith community toward a future in which God’s governance and care for them is complete, in which the experience of God’s love for them is realized ... this prayer invites the faith community to believe, as Jesus believed at his hour, that ‘the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them.’” – O’Day.

Jesus has called us together into the community of the Church which is the Body of Christ so that we might fulfill the mission into which we have been called, “*so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*” We are no more able to create unity among ourselves than that broken bowl on the floor of the Parker family kitchen could have healed itself. Our Lord Jesus prays this prayer on behalf of followers he knows very well; he is fully aware of their flaws, their brokenness, the many ways in which they are fractured and divided. The unity he creates out of these broken, sinful people is so that they might be one the ones who will bear the good news of Jesus Christ to others; they are to be that which Paul describes in his second letter to the Corinthians: “*But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*” (2 Corinthians 4:7). We are as fragile as that glued-together bowl that graced the Parker family Thanksgiving table; we bear the scars of our brokenness and the reality of our humanity which is as temporary as a humble clay pot. But God has chosen not to throw us away but unites us with the same love with which the Father and Son are united so that our unity might be a witness to the love of God which binds us together and offers healing and restoration to that which is broken.

- “The truth of the matter is that it is the love unites Father, Son and Holy Spirit that brings unity to the church. Given the wide variety of personalities, cultures, worldviews, and expectations among those of us who actually make up the church, it seems reasonable that the love of God is the only thing that can possibly untie us. As we turn our attention away from all our efforts at promoting unity and focus on the love of God that binds us together, then we have the opportunity to become a community that lives in such a way that the world may believe.” – Alan Brehm.

If a guest were to look upon the once-shattered bowl that had an honored place on the Parker family table whenever they gathered together, that person may have wondered why such an abomination was included among the much finer pieces of china and crystal. But for each member of the family, the bowl brought back memories of not only the Thanksgiving when the painstakingly glued it back together, but also of how it was a symbol of how this once-divided family had found its way back together. They still lived in the midst of their tensions and disagreements; there were still issues that scarred the family as the scars on the bowl bore witness to its brokenness. But when they gathered together, they rejoiced that it was love that brought them back and bound them together, a love that was so strong that the cords that bound them together could not be broken.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has gathered us together in all of our brokenness and sinfulness to be his Church, the faith community that will bear witness to his love that seeks to reach out to all people and to “*bind us*

together with cords that cannot be broken." To be a follower of Jesus is to be part of a greater whole, a community that has been brought together so that the Gospel message might be conveyed to all. It is not a perfect community, because it is made up of imperfect, flawed people who cannot heal themselves or reunite that which has been broken. It is Christ who makes us one, and therefore "*we are one in Christ whether we agree with each other or not. We are one in Christ whether we like one another or not. To become a part of Christ is to become a part of a community, a part of the one.*" (Hogan).

- "We may be abominations, but we are still God's pride and joy. All of us in the church need 'grace-healed eyes' to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us. 'To love a person,' says Dostoevsky, 'means to see him as God intended him to be.'" – Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

The ties that bind us together are possible because of the love of God that is present among us in Jesus Christ. We are broken, but Christ has made us whole; we are by nature sinful and unclean, but in his death and resurrection our Saviour has liberated us from the power of sin and death and would keep us separated from God and from one another. In our baptism into Christ's resurrection, we have been united in the one body of the Church which is the Body of Christ. Even in the presence of the scars of our ongoing brokenness and imperfections, we are that vessel through which the world may believe that nothing can separate us "*from the love of God that is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 8:39). As the Parkers chose to pick up the shattered pieces of their heirloom so that it might continue to serve its purpose at their family gatherings, our Lord has brought us together in our brokenness so that as the Body of Christ we might continue the purpose for which our Saviour has created us, "*so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*" Amen.