

Sunday, May 16, 2021

Sermon: That They May Be One

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If your religion doesn't make you more loving, become an atheist. Why? Because many atheists are more loving than the highly religious. When we use religion as a weapon against others to divide and exclude, we are better off to drop religion and become atheists.

John 17:6-19

Friends, today is the last Sunday of the Easter season. We started this season seven weeks ago. The Easter season is seven weeks - can you believe it was seven weeks ago that we had Easter? We celebrated Easter together. Easter is not a day, it is a season and we come to the end of the Easter season today. So, next week we are going to begin a new season in the church year called Pentecost. Pentecost is the day when the spirit fell upon the early church and there were people from all kinds of diverse backgrounds celebrating together on this day. It's a day that celebrates Moses receiving the Ten Commandments and so there were all kinds of early church people on that day celebrating together. And the spirit fell upon them. They were from different countries, different lands, they spoke different languages, and they were all together. They understood one another as they spoke in different languages.

This is the sense of unity that we are going to be celebrating tomorrow. Unity amidst the diversity of being human. This unity that is the church is not a unity that washes away our differences. It's a unity that comes together and says, yes, we may be different and guess what, there's room for that within the unity that is our community. And what is that unity based on? It's based on love. A love that seeks to will the good of the person who doesn't look like you, who may not act like you, who doesn't pray the same way as you do, who may think things differently about God or about being human than we do. But the thing that glues us together is a sense of love. And so we're going to be talking more about that next week on the first Sunday of Pentecost but today, on this last Sunday of Easter, we have a preview of what that's all about as Jesus prays this prayer.

There are a few things that I want to point out in this prayer. First, Jesus says that he has made God's name known to his disciples. If you look back in the Gospel of John, this is curious because Jesus never says - okay guys, here is God's name. Yeah, he calls God 'father' but that's not so much of a name as it is a title. So what is the name of God you might be wondering? As I researched this, I discovered that to know what this is getting at is somewhat of a euphemism in first century Judaism, in early Christianity. To know God's name is to know the character of God. So Jesus may have revealed a specific name for God but I think it's much more about Jesus revealing who God is and the fundamental character of who God is. And what is that character of God? It's love. As 1 John tells us, God is love.

In that reading this morning, we find that in the new testament there are only two definitions of God in the new testament. One of those definitions - how would you define God? The new testament defines

God this way - God is love. God is love. The other definition of God in the new testament also comes from 1 John and it says - this God is light and in God there is no darkness at all. God's love is just like that. Some people think that there is hatred within God, like God loves God's chosen people but God hates other people.

You may have heard of a theologian named John Calvin. John Calvin said exactly this, "God is love but only for those that God chooses to love. Other people God hates." That is wrong. The gospels don't show that. The 1 John does not show that. All that it says is that God is love. And anyone who says differently like there's hatred within God, or anger, or violence within God, completely misunderstands the name that Jesus gives us, the character that Jesus reveals about God. God has no hatred. God is love. That is who God is. That is the name of God, the character of God.

You may have been told something different by another church in your life. God loves you. And God loves them. And this can be a hard pill to swallow because part of the human condition is to think that we are somehow super special and if other people are special too, well that makes us less special. Guess what? Guess what makes you special. The good news that God's love is for everyone. Some people say well, if God loves everyone then what does that mean for me? It means that God loves you and God loves them. That is the oneness that Jesus is praying for here - may they be one as you and I are one. What is that oneness? It's the spirit of love, the spirit of love that wills the good of the other. That is what Christian love is all about. That's why Jesus says to love your neighbor as you love yourself. And your neighbor even includes those that you call your enemies.

Boy, is that hard. But that is what God is like. That is the oneness that Jesus is inviting us to live into - the oneness of love. Jesus goes on in this passage. The second thing he says that is so important is that Jesus came that we might have joy. That Jesus is joy. That God's joy might be made complete in us. When you think of religion do you think of joy? Probably not. You probably think of something that might burden you, that might weigh you down, that might be like God demanding you to fulfill certain tasks in order for you to earn God's love. And what's the joy in that? There is no joy in that.

When Jesus says that he has come into the world so that they might have my joy, might be made complete in them. This Christian spirituality is not about a burden that weighs you down. It's not about guilt that weighs you down. This is about joy. This is about living a life where joy is infectious. That joy is shared with one another. If you find someone in your life who expresses this joy and not this sense of burden. Because Christianity, if it's worth anything, is about love and about living in joy with one another.

Now that does not mean that there will only be safety for us. It doesn't mean that we won't go through hard times. It means that we will go through hard and difficult times with one another knowing that these hard and difficult times don't define us. That there is more to life. That even as we go through difficult times, painful times, traumatic times, that we do it with one another and in that we can find joy.

Now, Jesus also talks about the world and the evil one. And when Jesus talks about the world in this passage he's not talking about the earth, or the trees, or the grass, or your body, or my body. He's not talking about the world in that sense. He's talking about the powers, the structures in the world that lead us not into unity that Jesus has prayed for, not into joy that Jesus has prayed, for but lead us into division, lead us into being over and against one another, lead us into hatred for one another. That is

the world that Jesus prays for us to be delivered from. The mentality of us against them that we are seeing played out as the nation of Israel continues to fight against our Palestinian siblings, continues to evict them from their homes in east Jerusalem that they have lived in for their entire lives. This abuse of political power and as Bill talked about earlier in our prayers, the United States encouraging or allowing or supporting these kinds of us against them mentality, this violence that the state of Israel is perpetuating against our Palestinian siblings, needs to be called out for the evil that it is. That is the world that Jesus came to deliver us from where he prays that we might be delivered from getting caught up in those kinds of systems that yes, the nation of Israel is doing against our Palestinian siblings, and also that the United States continues to support. It needs to be called out so that we don't have systems that lead us over and against one another, that lead us into violence with one another. But Jesus came not to get us away from that world, not to rapture us into Heaven for Jesus says we continue to be in this world. Why? So that we can show the world a different way.

I got a card from our dear sister, Bernie, who I know is watching. Bernie said that the things that give her inspiration is when folks like Bill takes some of our church members to get the vaccine, when members of our congregation write cards of support to others, when Peg delivers groceries to people who are in need. That is showing the world a different way. And when Bernie helps her family the best way that Bernie can, it's an inspiration to me and to all of us. And so often times when we have these big, giant worldwide problems we can feel the weight of them on us and the burden of them on us. And we're saying where is the joy in the world? The joy in the world is noticing when Bill takes someone to get a vaccine, when Peg delivers groceries, when Jeff and Lita send baklava to folks living in different parts of the country. When our friends who are all over the United States now come together and support one another on our Facebook groups, letting one another know that we're not alone as we go through the struggles. That is the joy that Jesus is talking about and so, yes, we can talk about the worldwide systems that lead to oppression as well we should. And we should also look for ways to show the world that there's a different way of being. That Jesus calls us into the realm of God's presence of unity where there is diversity of unity, where we love one another and care for one another. Of unity where there is also joy in this life. May we live into that unity, that joy, and that love with one another now and forevermore. Amen

What Are You Up To?

Here's what George and Donna Converse are up to! Donna shared with George her sewing machine at the beginning of the pandemic and George learned how to use it so that he could sew masks. George has made 63 of them; most were shared with nursing homes and grocery store workers but they still have about a dozen.

The other picture is of their dog, Phoebe, catching a frisbee. As their "personal trainer" she takes Donna and George on 3 covid-safe walks a day. On the first walk, she fetches balls or catches frisbees, teaching Donna and George to appreciate the joys of routine.