

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
May 16, 2010

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Rev. John F. Koerner

John 17:20-26

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” (John 17:20 N.R.S.V.)

The Power of Community

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

In today’s lesson from John, we overhear Jesus praying for his disciples. He prays that they might have unity. Jesus also prays that the same love that the Father demonstrated toward him may be evident in the disciples, and that Christ himself might dwell in their hearts. Notice that this prayer is not only for the first disciples, it is also for us. Jesus prays for all who will believe through the witness of those first disciples.

We are overhearing Jesus praying to God for us. The prayer is not so much for us as individuals as it is prayer for the community of faith. It is prayer for the church, for the body of Christ.

Overhearing someone pray for you can sometimes be comforting. But it can also be disconcerting, challenging, some might even say dangerous.

I was reading about a young college student named Anthony. Anthony learned that his grandfather was gravely ill, so he rushed home from college to be with his grandfather.

Anthony and his grandfather visited together and each realized that this would probably be their last conversation. After while the grandfather said, “Well, Anthony, I’m really feeling weak. Let’s pray together before you go.”

Anthony grasped his grandfather’s hand and began by praying for his grandfather’s illness to be lifted. Then it was his grandfather’s turn. He prayed, “Lord, keep working with Anthony during his days at college. Always remind him that he is loved by you and cared for by you. And help Anthony, someday to see that he ought to be a pastor. Amen.”

“What did you say?” exclaimed Anthony. “What was that about my being a pastor?”

“Anthony, I was talking to God,” his grandfather replied. “I was praying. Besides, I’m very tired now. Thank you for coming to see me. Good bye.” It was the last thing Anthony heard his grandfather say. (*Pulpit Resources*, April, May, June 2010, pg. 36)

It was disconcerting for Anthony to overhear his grandfather's prayer. If we are really listening to the prayer of Jesus from John 17, it is equally disconcerting for us. Jesus prays that his church might be united. And yet it is easy to see that the church is not united. Not only are we divided into denominations, but we are also divided within individual churches. Jesus prays that the love of God may flow through us and that he might dwell in us. And yet just as there is backbiting, petty arguments, and divisive behavior in the work place, these things exist within the church too. We wish it weren't so, but sadly in the 2000 year history of the church, we still haven't been able to eliminate that.

We make jokes about it because quite frankly if we didn't laugh, we'd break down and cry.

Like the one about the man who experienced a great spiritual experience and because of that he gave up all cussing and swearing, . . . except in session meetings.

It is easy to get discouraged with the church, to call us all a bunch of hypocrites or worse. But before we get too carried away, we need to remember that the church exists because Jesus Christ called it into being. And Jesus not only prayed for the church then, but continues to pray for the church even today.

We are moving more and more into a time when our society is not only discouraged with the church, but thinks the church is irrelevant. And so we worry about our church, as if it were up to us to sustain the church by our own power.

At the Presbytery Meeting last Tuesday, we heard a sermon by Rev. Pete Perry, the president of Montreat Conference Center. He talked about how when we are worried, we are tempted to depart from the very calling that defines us as Christ's Church.

Perry said that when he was a pastor, he had a member come into his office and say, "Pete, when I joined this church all the bankers, and leading citizens of this town belonged to this church, now we have almost no community leaders. Why should I be a member of this church?" We worry about our church.

Perry related that in his Presbytery in North Carolina they were debating a motion to divest their investments in Catapillar corporation. The reason for this motion was because Catapillar supplies bulldozers that Israel is using to knock down the houses of Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Many of these Palestinians are Christians and their families have been Christians for generations, even centuries. The debate was not about what is God calling us to do. The debate was not about whether the reports about Israel's actions were accurate. The debate was not even about whether divestment works. The concern that was raised was that we have members of our churches who work for Catapillar corporation and they might get mad about such a motion and leave our churches. We worry about our church.

Perry related that several years ago a certain church leader predicted that if we keep on the way we have been going, the Presbyterian Church will soon be no more significant than the Amish. We worry about our church, but then again who is to say that the Amish are insignificant? Remember

the news from a couple of years ago when a deranged gunman entered an Amish school in Pennsylvania and slaughtered the children and the teacher, he was then himself gunned down by the police. It was the Amish community who in a show of compassion that is rare in our modern world, went out of their way to care for the widow and children of the gunman. They showed the genuine love of Christ, and the whole world took notice.

Stay with me here, for I am about to change gears. I read a wise saying the other day that struck me as very profound. The saying was this: "A friend is one who knows the song of your heart and sings it back to you when you have forgotten the words."

The power of the church is not that we are perfect, but that when we meet together in worship, we hear again the prayer of Jesus for the church, we read the scriptures, we sing the great hymns. These are not descriptive of who we are now. Rather they are a reminder of our true destiny. We meet together as a church to hear again, to remember the song of our heart- the one that God placed there when he claimed us as his own.

Today in Baptism, God will claim Brayden as his own. Brayden will be sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. And he will be made a part of the body of Christ which is the church. God will place his song within Brayden's heart. And every time we meet together we will remind Brayden and each other of God's song in our hearts.

I'm reminded of the book by C. S. Lewis, "The Screwtape Letters." The book is supposed to contain letters from a senior devil in hell to a minor devil. They are advice on how to tempt his charges away from God.

At one point the senior devil writes, "Keep your human focused on the petty disagreements within the church, on the little things that make him unhappy. But whatever you do, don't let your person see the church in all its glory coming down through the ages like a mighty army, don't ever let them see the banners flying."

The church is not what it might be, but every once in awhile we do see the banners flying and we remember the song of our heart. I was reading about a church pastor in Egypt who was being pressured by the government to leave the country. Christianity is barely tolerated in Egypt. And this pastor had been too successful in his efforts to spread the gospel. So the government wanted him gone.

Egyptian government officials let it be known that even to be seen in public with this pastor could mean death or imprisonment. The Christian churches of the area responded by throwing a great feast in the streets for this pastor. They remembered the promise from Psalm 23, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." (Psalm 23:5) So the people of the church came out in numbers and ate in the street with this Christian pastor. Even neighbors who were not Christians found the courage to join in the feast. And the Egyptian government backed off.

The people of the church found courage that day because they reminded each other of the true song of their hearts. And the banners of the church flew high that day.

We let the banners of the church fly here at this church too. We do that literally on Scottish Heritage Sunday. We see and remember that great church of which we are a part coming down through the ages, banners flying. But we do it also in a thousand little ways. We do it through the prayer shawl ministry, through the Community Lenten services, the youth work camps, programs like Vacation Bible School, and the pastor's discretionary fund. This last month alone we had 52 families come to us who were in desperate straits- in danger of losing their heat, electricity, or housing. We were not able to help all of them because of the size of their bills, but we were able to help 17 of them and we were able to give an encouraging word to the others. Every time the love of Christ touches the hurts of the world, the banners of the church fly high.

It is easy to be cynical of the church because we don't live up to the words in the prayers that we pray, the scriptures that we read, the hymns that we sing. But these things are not meant to be a description of where we are now, rather they are a call to where we can be in Christ. When we have forgotten the words to the song of our hearts, Christ moves among us to remind us of them once again. His power will not be denied.

Christ said to Peter, "Upon your confession I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." And that is who we are today. The church that Jesus Christ built. May Christ continue to pray for us and through us. May he give us eyes to see the banners of his church flying high down through the ages. And may he give us ears to hear again the true song of our hearts.

Amen.