

## E PLURIBUS UNUM

11-16-03  
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John 17:20-23

TEXT: *May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (23)*

### INTRODUCTION

Last words always carry special weight and significance. When we know we are speaking or writing our last words, they are direct, to the point with all the fluff boiled out. It is what is most important and the essential we want remembered.

Just over a year ago, in July of 2002, there was that terrible cave-in at the Quecreek coal mine in Pennsylvania where nine miners were trapped for 78 hours. Do you remember the round-the-clock efforts in drilling an air shaft and then finally a rescue hole 240 ft. deep, the equivalent of 20 stories of solid granite, to save their lives? Their bodies were almost entirely immersed in cold water much of that time, with only inches of airspace above their faces. While they never lost hope, they realized this could well be the end for them. As the water was rising, some wrote final letters to their families on scraps of paper they found— a paper sack from a lunch box, whatever they could find. What would you have written as a final short note? I'll bet it would be a variation of what they wrote. For at that moment we all think of love and faith. That's what is of ultimate importance.

When people reach the end, the thing that is important is not the kind of cars they have, the nice homes they live in, clothes, or money earned. It all boils down to relationships: the people we love and our trust in the God who loves us.

Do you realize Jesus, prayed specifically for us just hours before his death? The prayer is in John 17 and could be considered the *real* Lord's prayer. What we commonly refer to as the Lord's Prayer could actually more properly be called the Disciples Prayer, for Jesus taught his disciples to pray it. John 17 is a powerful prayer Jesus prays for himself, his disciples, and for all that will come to faith in the future— which includes us. Let's look at that portion of the prayer directed for us, 17:20-23, and see what everything boils down to at the end, what Jesus is most concerned about for us.

### “THAT THEY MAY BE ONE”

Three times in this chapter in his prayer, Jesus prays for us “*that they may be one*” (17:11; 21; 22). This last night with his disciples (Jn. 13-17), Jesus uses the word love 17 times. In addition, in verse 23 Jesus asks his Father, “*May they be brought to complete unity.*”

Could Jesus be any clearer about his passion for us, once we become a Christian? His prayer is that then, in the church we will become one with each other. It is the same kind of unity, Jesus says, as exists between him and the Father. Why is this so important? Twice Jesus says in these four verses, “*so that the world may believe...*” So, Jesus' plan for us in the church is to come together in complete unity, and that will give witness to the world of the power of God and the truth revealed in Jesus.

You recognize the title of my sermon as the motto of our nation, *E Pluribus Unum*, meaning, “out of many, one.” It is inscribed on our coins and in many other places in our government expressing who we are. It is a wonderful idea and our nation is about bringing many diverse people, races, from all over the world and trying to form them into a oneness called The United States of America. As noble as that ideal is, we also realize it is not true. We are not really one as a nation, except in name .

However, the church is where that motto, *e pluribus unum*, should find its best expression. It is miraculous when it happens, as Jesus indicates. It is a product of His life within us—

*I have given them the glory that you gave me,  
that they may be one as we are one:  
I in them and you in me. (22-23)*

At our invitation, Jesus enters into our lives through the Holy Spirit, so He does indeed live in us. One manifestation of the life of Jesus within us is the kind of love Jesus expresses. That love is beyond our human capability and will witness to the world that we have Christ living in us.

While all of Jesus’ words are essential and important for us, this is the only time Jesus specifically speaks of his heart’s concern for those of us who would come to faith later through the witness of the disciples. So I think it’s fair to say this is *really, really* important. Living in unity with other believers, then, is not just some nice ideal, but a core issue.

Also, by praying this way, Jesus knows where we’re going to have problems, and where we need a lot of help. Getting along with one another is never easy! All the letters in the New Testament, written to churches, to some degree address this problem of loving one another and living in unity in the church. Some letters are almost entirely dealing with this. And, of course, you can look out at the current church landscape with our multitude of denominations. I think there’s in the neighborhood of 7,000 different Christian denominations. While being together in organization and even in doctrine is not essential, working together in unity and loving and caring for one another across denominational lines is essential because it is the heart of what Jesus calls us to do. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord, who affirms Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior are part of the Body of Christ along with us. We must never put-down, reject, or in any way fail to love another Christian.

The big picture of the unity of all believers in all churches is important. But we need to start where we are, in our church family. I know I am easily infected by the rampant individualism of our day. It seems like one theme in our culture is for everyone to be independent, live unto themselves. We don’t want to wait for anyone, adapt to anyone else’s needs, or share what we have. Even if it’s an item we use just once or twice a year, we all want our own so we don’t have to ask someone else to help us out. Our communities contain less and less community. In his book, [Bowling Alone](#) , Robert Putman notes changes over in the last 25 years that denote a decline in community:

- Attending club meetings, down 58%

- Family dinners, down 33%
- Having friends over, down 45%

The church is where true community should be exhibited to the world. Let's look at some ways we can all grow in this area.

### **CULTIVATING COMMUNITY**

First of all, it means we need to be together in the church to develop community. Being one with each other is not just sentiment, theory, or some ethereal ideal. If it is to have any depth and meaning, it means getting close to others and learning to love them within the church. Many today feel they can be a "good Christian" without being involved with a church family. Now I'm not going to pass judgement and say everyone outside a church family cannot be a Christian. But, Biblically speaking, and in Jesus' clear teaching, a crucial part of being a Christian is our connection to the church. I will admit, in many ways, it is far easier to be a Christian without the church. It spares us a lot of inconvenience, commitment to things we may not feel excited about or really feel like doing, the relationships we don't choose that can sometimes be messy, and occasionally, it can spare us from being hurt by others. But, staying away from the church or keeping it at arms length denies us the opportunity of the most profound character changes and learning to love like Christ. You see, church and family are the only places we don't get to choose who we live and work with. And that is what makes the church so valuable in knocking off our rough edges and shaping us into expressions of Christ's love.

Craig Barnes notes that at the height of the Protestant Reformation, a great debate broke out among reformers about the best model for the church. Some maintained the church should be a *school for saints*. With this model, there was great emphasis upon the purity of the church. Members of the church should be articulate in their faith and obedient disciples of Christ. Anyone else should be kept out. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin rejected this model and suggested instead a better model would be that the church is a *hospital for sinners*. According to this model, every member comes to the church for the same reason— healing of a sin-sick soul.

"The hospital model" is helpful in dealing with all the imperfections and faults we find in the church. The very things we felt we had to hide with the "school of saints model" to be accepted become invitations to enter the hospital. Our failures, sins, and hurts are all reasons to come to the church. One doesn't enter the hospital because they are so healthy. They come to get well. We are in the church not because we deserve to be there but because we need to be there.

Of course, any model pushed too far breaks down. This is not to suggest the church should have no concern for purity, faithful discipleship, and growth into the likeness of Christ. But, remember we are part of the church because of our common need and thirst to find God. Our differences are absorbed by that common need.

A couple of weeks ago, on [60 Minutes](#), there was a refreshing segment on the major,

most sophisticated hospital in the Middle East, located in Jerusalem, run by the Nation of Israel. This is a hospital where Israelis and Palestinians work side-by-side. Everyone who enters is welcomed and treated equally. The terrorist who has been responsible for killing many Jews is treated just as well as the Jews injured by his bomb. Their one agenda is healing and health. That reflects the spirit in which the church is called to serve.

Being together in a church is not enough to create oneness and unity. It takes considerable effort on our part. James 3:18 puts it well:

*You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor. (The Message)*

“The hard work of getting along with each other” tells it like it is. God places us in community for our growth. If you like everyone and they are just delightful people to spend time with, how does that develop your character? It is the people that irritate us, who are boring, who have a few personality flaws, are inconsiderate, etc. that give us an opportunity for growth in love. But if love is the most important thing in our lives, as I suggested in the beginning and as Scripture affirms, then shouldn’t we be grateful for such opportunities to grow in love? If we associate only with people who have similar interests to ours and agree with our ideas we miss out on something that would develop our souls and have eternal significance. It is good that we don’t all like the same music or the same kind of liturgy. It is good that some want a more intellectual approach and some want a more emotional approach. It is good that some are careful and deliberate in their following Christ and some are spontaneous. It gives us a chance to learn from one another, appreciate our differences, and grow together.

Sometimes I meet people who stay away from the church because they’ve been hurt by the church or someone in the church. I too have been hurt by the church and people in it. Most of you here today, if you’ve been very involved have been hurt at sometime or other in the church. But staying away is not an option if we want to follow Jesus. Have you ever been hurt by your family? Have you been hurt by your spouse? Of course we all have. But do we just leave because of hurt? While some do, mature people stay in there and work it through. AND in the staying and working on relationships, some of the deepest growth occurs in us. Leaving is easy. Staying and learning to forgive, relinquish control, and let go of our judgement is the only way to wholeness.

Usually, when there is conflict, it is a sign our focus has gotten onto less important things. The Bible calls these “disputable matters.” This includes issues of personality, preferences, styles, methods, and interpretations that aren’t really core issues. One small denomination that was fairly prevalent in the part of Ohio where we were last, had a split a number of years ago over baptism. They all agreed baptism had to be by immersion. And, they agreed the person should go under three times— one each for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But the split as I understand it, was over whether they went under the water backwards or frontwards. To me that is a disputable matter.

Our focus must always remain on Christ. He is the head of the church, His body. Forget our preferences. He must be exalted and His purposes fulfilled.

The most essential quality we need to cultivate to fulfill Jesus' prayer for unity is humility. Again and again, through the New Testament humility is lifted up as the key element we need to create true community. Phil. 2:3, admonishes, *Do nothing out of selfish ambition, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.* It goes on to mention the example of Jesus.

At the beginning of this last night with his disciples, Jesus models the road we must follow to humility— serving one another. These disciples are full of one-upmanship, jealous, quick to blame each other, and arguing about who is greatest. What does Jesus do? Does he lecture them or scold them? Listen to how John tells it in chapter 13:1-6 and 12-16.

All things are under Jesus' power. Yet, He humbles himself, taking the role of a slave to serve His disciples. In so doing, He models the road to healing their differences and forming community. Then Jesus goes on and gives his disciples a new command.

*"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

(John 13:34-35)

Jesus is saying love is more important than who is right, who is wrong, who is most important here, or who is going to control things and get their way. Through the humblest act of service, laying aside His power, Jesus breaks the power struggle and demonstrates the way to come together and build unity.

Foot washing is symbolic of humble service. It is the key to bringing us into unity. If you're having trouble in your marriage, washing your spouses feet would be a great first step to restoring unity. Not necessarily literally (though I do love a good foot massage), but in finding some humble way to serve the other, to honor the other, and it will break the logjam of our hearts. It brings us to humility that can bring healing. This applies to every relationship in our lives, especially the church family.

I recall my first foot washing. I was just a new pastor, only a year or two out of seminary. The presbytery was having a clergy retreat over a couple of days. I remember almost nothing of it except the closing worship involving washing another person's feet if we chose to do so. I immediately felt, "I can sit this out. No way am I going to do this." There was one young pastor, Jim, in the presbytery that was a real irritant to me. In presbytery meetings he always had to say his piece about everything— and even worse, his piece was always *extremely* liberal. When I arrived for the retreat it did not please me to see him there. As about 50 of us sat in that circle for the closing worship and to voluntarily participate by washing someone's feet, the leader asked us to be in prayer and simply do as the Holy Spirit led. The presence of the Lord was there in a sweet

way. And, I moved from my thinking, "I'll sit this one out," to, "OK, Lord, if you want me to wash someone's feet, let me know." Then it happened— I **knew** Jesus was asking me to go and wash Jim's feet. In the inner debate, I posed all kinds of arguments. But, bottom line, I knew he did acknowledge Jesus as his Lord and Savior— in spite of all his other misguided ideas, theology, and obnoxious personality. Remember Paul's question in Rom 14: 4, *Who are you to judge someone else's servant?* If Jim acknowledges Jesus as his Master, what business do I have in judging him? That's Jesus' affair. Finally, I surrendered, walked across the room and knelt at Jim's feet and washed them. As I knelt there, the Holy Spirit came in gentle sweetness, washing my heart, cleansing all my resentment and judgement of Jim. It was an awesome, holy time. And, guess what? Jim ceased to be a problem for me in presbytery. I saw him with new eyes and my heart was free.

John begins the events of this last night in the upper room with Jesus demonstrating love and community by washing his disciple's feet and giving them the command to love one another (chapter 13). He ends the scene in chapter 17 with Jesus' passionate prayer that we be one. That's the big message of Jesus' final night of teaching.

I believe the Holy Spirit is released in new, powerful ways when we come together. At Pentecost, they were finally, after ten days of being together in prayer, *all with one accord in one place* (Acts 2:1). Throughout Acts, you see the early church joining together in prayer, worship, communion, meals, ministry, serving one another, and meeting each other's needs— no lone rangers. That's how the Holy Spirit's power is truly unleashed.

## CONCLUSION

Learning to love as Christ loves us is the most important assignment in life. At the end of our lives, that is what really matters. So every difficult person, everything that doesn't go *my way*, everyone we need to forgive, offer invaluable opportunities to grow in love. Let's not squander them. For Jesus said, *Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.*" (John 13:35).

I'm closing with the words of Eph 4:1-7-- words echoed again and again in other letters in the New Testament:

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

*But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.*

