

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
May 17, 2015

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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

John 17: 6-19

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17:11 N.R.S.V.)

Jesus Prays for the Church

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

One night the little white church was struck by lightening, or so the story goes. The fire department was trying and failing to put out the flames. Soon half the town was gathered around watching. The pastor was there and so were many of the members. The pastor noticed one old farmer there who was notorious for avoiding the church. The pastor went over and greeted Jim. Then he said, "I'm a little surprised to see you here, Jim. You usually stay as far away from the church as you can." The old farmer nodded his head, then said, "It's like this preacher. I ain't never seen the church on fire before."

It is easy to get critical of the church. All of us have an ideal in our minds of what the church should be like, and when it falls short of our ideals, we are tempted to just turn away. People often say things like, "Well, I don't really have much use for the institutional church." They say that as if there is some other purely spiritual church. There isn't. The church on earth is imperfect, because it is filled with imperfect people.

It has often been said that the church is not a sanctuary for saints. It is a hospital for sinners. Let me push that hospital metaphor a bit. No one ever says, "I am not going to the hospital to get well. Some of their patients are sicker than I am. Beside which, there are a rather large number of people on their staff who are not doing 'mediciney things. Some of those people are cleaning rooms, filling out reports, delivering lunch trays. I really think a hospital should be strictly about 'mediciney things.' Nobody ever says that. Oh sure the staff sometimes wishes they had more time for the pure practice of medicine. But no sensible person would ever suggest that the bed pans don't need to be emptied. Likewise not everything that happens in a church is going to be exciting and glamorous.

The church on earth is imperfect, but it is the only church we have. It is also the church which Christ himself established. In our lesson from John 17, Jesus prays for the church. He prays for

his disciples. And that is who we are. We are all of us disciples of Jesus Christ - forgiven sinners, carrying out the work of our Lord in the world.

Look at the things that Jesus prays for as regards the church. He prays for protection. Now, all of us like to be safe and secure, but is that what Jesus means by protection? Remember that these very same disciples that overheard this prayer were persecuted, tortured, imprisoned, and many of them killed. So was the prayer of Jesus ineffective, or was he praying for a different kind of protection?

Notice in verse 11 of our lesson that Jesus prays, “Holy Father, protect them in your name . . . so that they may be one . . . Jesus prays to protect the unity of his church. Because in unity, there is great power.

We gather in the church not just to worship, but also to encourage and to support one another. We gather to listened to each other; to correct and to be corrected; to uplift and to be uplifted.

Barbara Brown Taylor gives us a picture of the church where unity provides support and encouragement. She tells of the brain-damaged young man who shows up one Sunday and asks to become a member of the church. As carefully as he tries to hide it, it is clear that he is out of everything-out of food, out of money, out of family to take him in. How does her church respond to that young man’s needs? She describes it like this: “No one makes a big fuss. Very quietly, someone takes him grocery shopping while someone else finds him a room. Someone else finds out what happened to his disability check while someone else makes an appointment to get his teeth fixed. And do you know what? Years later he is still there, in the front pew on the right, surrounded by his family, the church.”

Taylor continues, “. . . like the woman with a recurrent cancer who is told she has six months to live. The church gathers around her and her husband - laying hands on them, bringing them casseroles, cleaning their house. Someone comes up with the idea of giving the woman a foot massage and painting her toenails red which does more for her spirits than any visit from the pastor. (This woman with terminal cancer) gives her jewelry away, she lets her driver’s license expire, she starts writing poetry again. She prepares to die, but instead, she gets better.

“On Christmas Eve she is back in church for the first time in months, with her oxygen tank slung over her shoulder and a clear plastic tube running under her nose. After the first hymn, she makes her way to the lectern to read the lesson from Isaiah, Her tank hisses every five seconds. Every candle in the place glitters in her eyes. ‘Strengthen the weak hands;’ she reads, bending her body toward the words, ‘and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.’ When she sits down, the congregation knows they have not just heard the word of the Lord, They have seen it in action.” (Dynamic Preaching, April-June 2015. pg. 45)

Not only is there healing and help in this kind of unity, there is also great power. Together we can so much more than we could ever do as individuals. No matter how dark it gets in our lives

or how hidden the trail, we keep going because we know that we are not alone.

Jesus prayed for our unity to be protected. He prayed also for our preservation. He knows that Judas will slip away from the fellowship and he prays that others will not also slip away. So many people of our time have slipped away from the church. Maybe they were wounded by a member of the church. Maybe they became distracted by the world. Jesus prays that we will not slip away from the fellowship and that we will not slip away from the faith.

The church can sometimes be a pain, but it is also one of God's greatest gifts to us. It is a reminder that all of us live in the palm of God's hand, and that is where we need to stay. Kathleen Lowthert tells of a special conversation that she had with her two-year-old granddaughter, Shanice.

Kathleen was scheduled for surgery. She found that she was very nervous about it. She was reading a pamphlet about the operation when Shanice came up to her and said, "Grandma, show me the angels."

"Angels?" Kathleen asked puzzled.

Then Shanice pointed to a photo of three figures clothed in white on the cover of the brochure Kathleen had been reading. "No, honey," Kathleen said, "That's a doctor, a nurse, and a patient."

"Yes, Grandma," Shanice insisted, "Angels."

Suddenly Kathleen was reminded of the words in Psalm 91, "For God shall give his angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone." Kathleen found a peace come over her regarding her surgery. God had used her granddaughter to remind her that she had nothing to fear. She was surrounded by angels. (Dynamic Peaching, pg. 46)

Jesus prays for his church. He prays for protection, for preservation, and finally for perseverance. Jesus knew that the future of his church depending on his followers perseverance. Jesus knew that without his church the whole world was in danger.

There is an old legend of the angels questioning Jesus when he got back to heaven. Lord, they asked, what is going to happen to your work on earth. Jesus told them that he had told his disciples the good news and they in turn would tell others the good news. These others would tell still others until the good news spread around the whole world.

The angels were skeptical. They knew that sometimes human beings were weak and fallible. What if they quit in midstream? What is your back up plan, the angels wanted to know? "There is no back up plan," said Jesus, "I am counting on them."

It is impossible to overstate the kind of impact that Christianity has had on the world. No other religion gives the hope of salvation by grace. No other religion teaches the kind of love, and mercy, and forgiveness that Christ gave us. No other religion teaches "love your enemy."

Jesus knew that the future of the world depended on his disciples staying on track, persevering. Had they quit in the face of persecution the world would be a far poorer place today. Had they given up because it was just too hard, we would not know the good news of salvation today.

If the early disciples had not stayed true to the work Christ gave them. We would not be here today.

Of course we are not in this alone, we have the Holy Spirit to help us. I want to pull in the passage from Acts for this last point. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he bestowed the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. I want you to note that one of the first things that the disciples did, was to find someone to replace Judas. It was that important.

They discussed this with each other, they prayed for God's guidance, and they elected Matthais. They added him to their number and with the Holy Spirit, they began their work. And the world has never been the same.

I can't help but note that the big problem for the early church was persecution. It was dangerous to be a Christian back then. The big problem for us is not persecution. Our problem is apathy. It is true that some of the work of the church is about as glamorous as emptying bed pans. Yet it is very important work.

I am glad that Jesus still prays for us, for his church. We need all the help we can get. Listen. The future of the earth depends now on us, just as surely as it depended on those first disciples. They did their part. Now it is up to us.

That is a bit scary, but it is also exciting. We are part of something far greater than anything we could imagine. We are part of something holy, something mystic, something of vital importance. We are Christ's church. We are God's gift to the world.

Amen.

