Oneness in Christ
John 17:20-26
Sermon 11-21-21

Being a lifelong Kansas Citian, I love Kansas City. I love our local sports teams. I love the BBQ. I love the Plaza. I love the fact that it’s the perfect size city – not too big and not too small. I love that it’s a great place to raise a family and own a house. I love its diversity. I love the fact that the vast majority of our family and friends live here.

I love that our city falls on both sides of the state line, and that our church has campuses in both states. I love that I was born in the 816 and now live in the 913, so I can claim allegiance to both. I love that I grew up in the Shawnee Mission District, and now my neighborhood is in the Blue Valley District, and the place I do most of my ministry is in the Center District... which means I feel at home in all of those places.

I’m Kansas City, born and raised. And I love representing my city when I travel out of town.

But then when I learned as an adult about the history of how our city was developed, and about the racial and socio-economic segregation and division that was intentionally built into the city’s infrastructure, I was deeply saddened.

And then I started to learn about racially restrictive covenants, and redlining, and white flight, and generational poverty, and Jim Crow laws, and race riots, and arsons, and bombings... most of which occurred just on the east side of a street that runs north and south called Troost (show Troost Ave pic).

And then a few years ago, at our EPC General Assembly I got a chance to tour the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, and as I was looking at the wall inside the infamous Lorraine Motel where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, I saw on the wall a display with maps of four cities and an inscription that read, “Jim Crow Today”... and to my surprise, Kansas City was one of the four city maps on display! (show pic of Jim Crow Today).
If you look very closely at this map, you’ll notice a bunch of red and blue dots, representing the different race and ethnicities. Red represents where white people live, and blue represents where black people live.

This map from the 2010 census shows the east-west segregation more clearly. (Show KC segregation map pic). Can you tell where Troost is?

But the crazy thing is that I just so happened to take this tour on June 19th, which meant absolutely nothing to me at the time. For me, it was just another day. Here I was, 34 years old, and I had been involved in urban ministry for the past 10 years, but I had no clue that June 19th was in fact Juneteenth. Nor did I have any clue what Juneteenth represented. I was naïve.

Fast forward two years. Pastor Greg and some Pray KC friends of Colonial planned an event on Juneteenth 2020 that was called, “Pray on Troost.” So several thousand of us from all different churches lined the east side of Troost to pray down the wall of hostility, segregation, and division. (Show Pray on Troost pic).

That night we saw folks from both sides of the state line from all different denominations and ethnicities... black, brown and white, young and old, men and women, rich and poor, urban and suburban gather together side-by-side to spend an hour praying that our great city would become one... And that we would learn to love one another as one church with one mission to reach one city with one gospel to the glory of one Triune God.

Let me ask you a question: Do you think Jesus cares about oneness in the Church? Let’s find out. Would you stand with me as we read together from John 17:20-26?

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 i in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, even
though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Thank you, please be seated.

We have now come to the end of Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17. These are the very last words Jesus spoke before the events of Gethsemane and His Passion began to unfold.

This is arguably the most intimate prayer Jesus prays in all of scripture. He begins His high priestly prayer by praying for Himself to be glorified as the Father is glorified. Then He moves on to praying for his disciples, whom He has spent the past few years teaching and leading. Specifically, He prays for them to be protected from the evil one and consecrated in the truth.

Now, Jesus turns his attention to pray for his future followers that will make up the “Big C” Church for generations to come, which includes you and me. Think about that for a second. When Jesus prayed this prayer of unity to the Father 2,000 years ago, He had you and me in mind.

Our “Pray on Troost” event and others like it are a direct manifestation of Jesus’ high priestly prayer.

Jesus says, “I do not ask for these only” referring to the Twelve, but also “those who will (one day) believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us.”

Jesus prayed that we may all be one. Now I went back and looked up this word “all” in the Greek. And it turns out that “all” means… all. If Jesus was from the South, he would say, “all ya’ll.” See, at first I thought He was only referring to Chiefs fans… or those of us in the Great Plains Presbytery.

Turns out, Jesus wasn’t simply referring to a specific congregation, or denomination, or generation, or city, or country, or hemisphere, or skin color. He
was referring to all Christians in all corners of the world throughout all generations.

Now I also looked up this word translated, “one.” In Greek, the word is *heis*. It’s a very common word. In fact, there are hundreds of verses in the New Testament that contain this word.

One of these is found in Galatians 3:28, which says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Do you know what this means? It doesn’t mean that those different people groups weren’t important. After all, God created us with different skin colors and genders on purpose for a purpose. Instead, it means that God loves all His children equally, regardless of sex, status, or skin color. For us, then, there should not even be a hint of racism, classism, or sexism present within the church.

In Hebrew, the word translated “one” is *e-had*. One of the first times we see this word is in Genesis 2:24 when God says, “Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

Immediately, we see that there is an intimacy associated with becoming “one.” Like in a Godly marriage, there exists a deep mingling of souls – of mind, body, and spirit. The persons are still distinct and unique, but according to scripture, the two become one.

This oneness that God is referring to in marriage is a reflection of the oneness that exists within the Trinity. One God in three persons. The specific language that was adopted at the Council of Nicaea was *homoousion*: of the same being, essence, or substance.

And it’s part of our Nicene Creed, which says that Jesus is, “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (essence) with the Father...”
And this is what Jesus was praying for here in John 17, “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us.”

There is a mutual indwelling, or abiding, that Jesus prays for here.

So, the oneness that God desires for us to experience in our marriage is the same oneness that Jesus prays over the Church, which is also the oneness He gets to experience on a continual basis with the other members of the Trinity.

Now I want to pause and point out a clarification about what oneness is not. Oneness is not sameness.

One God, three persons. One marriage, two spouses. One Church, many congregations. Each member is part of a covenant relationship that was created with unique worth, work, and witness in mind.

While one in essence and substance, each member of the Trinity is distinct in personality and role. The same is true of a marriage: while one flesh, each spouse has a distinct personality and role. Likewise, each member of the church, while one body, has a distinct personality and role.

And this is where we often get into trouble when it comes to racial reconciliation. Intentionally or unintentionally, the assumption from the majority culture is that minorities are welcome to join as long as they become assimilated, or integrated, into the majority’s way of life. Meaning their personalities and roles are implicitly or explicitly expected to conform to the dominant culture. When this happens, minority cultures feel devalued and robbed of the distinct personalities and roles that God gave them to accomplish His Kingdom purposes.

Dr. Tony Evans says this in his book, Oneness Embraced: “We have misunderstood oneness to mean a denial of racial distinctions. This has left us with the result of forcing oneness rather than actualizing it. This creates polarization and fragmentation since forced oneness can only come as a result of one group imposing its definition of unity on the other rather than an embracing of individuality together toward the pursuance of a common goal.”
Simply put, Jesus’ prayer for oneness is not at the expense of diversity. He does not dismiss or downplay the need for diversity. On the contrary, Jesus prays for unity amid diversity, for this is a picture of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven pointing us toward a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue who will stand before God’s throne worshipping the Lamb (Rev 7:9).

Oneness is not sameness. Diversity is good, it’s God-given, and it is to be celebrated by the church. But if diversity is biblical, then why does Jesus pray for unity? Why does He need to pray that we may become one?

Because Jesus knows that Satan exists. Dr. Evans often says that it’s not a skin issue; it’s a sin issue. Satan’s main objective is to divide the church and ruin its witness. Is it working?

I was at a conference last week and one of the keynote speakers, Soong-Chan Rah, said sometimes he likes to play a game called, “If I were Satan.” I don’t recommend playing at home.

But if I were Satan and I wanted to destroy the church, I would begin by sending a worldwide virus to scare people into isolation for a whole year to the point where families are unable to visit their loved ones in nursing homes and hospitals. This virus would cause more than 5 million deaths worldwide including 765K in the US alone. As a result, faithful church members will become too afraid to return to church. In fact, many will never return.

And then, while tension is at an all-time high, I would convince a corrupt, white police officer to kneel on a black man’s neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, causing him to suffocate to death on national TV. And I would try and convince everyone that the victim was a thug who deserved exactly what he got.

In the process, I would force the church to pick sides between black lives and blue lives. Then, I would send groups to riot in the streets while the church sat on their couches and watched on TV, shaking their heads.

Furthermore, I would elevate secular theories and non-Christian organizations to educate the world about the value of black and brown lives while the church argues over when to bring back coffee on Sunday mornings.
After that, I would do my best to ruin the integrity a free election, causing evangelical Christians to become even more cynical, angry, and bitter. Then, I would send self-proclaimed “patriots” to storm our nation’s capital building while holding up “Jesus Saves” banners and praying to the god of Christian nationalism on the Senate room floor.

Later, I would introduce mask mandates as a way to distract followers of Jesus from a larger pandemic, which is a genocide of 125,000 innocent babies being aborted every single day around the world, including 3,000 per day in the U.S.

Satan is relentless, isn’t he? His mission is to steal, kill, and destroy. Do you see why it was so essential that Jesus prayed for oneness in the church?

Last weekend, my oldest son had a basketball practice on Saturday, followed by a big birthday party sleepover that we hosted for him and his friends on Saturday night. We had 14 third graders at our house and eight of them stayed the night. They had an absolute blast!

But on Sunday evening, we got a message from one of the parents of one of his teammates who had tested positive for COVID. On Monday and Tuesday, we learned that six of the kids that spent the night at our house were now sick, four of whom were now COVID positive, as well as two of their dads who had spent time inside our house. Turns out we hosted a spreader event in our home last weekend.

So this whole week, I was nervous that someone in my family was going to get COVID and I would need to quarantine. Which means I wouldn’t be able to preach.

And then on Tuesday I learn that a staff member who was supposed to participate in worship was sick. Then on Wednesday morning I learned that our two additional staff members were sick. And then on Wednesday night, more news of another covid case among the staff. And at that point I started getting the feeling that Satan might not want this church service to happen.
Satan’s assault on the church is a real thing. Which is why, of all the things Jesus could have prayed for, He chose to pray for oneness in the Church.

But oneness of what? There are at least three things from our text this morning.

Jesus prayed for God’s Church to be:

1. One in love
2. One in mission
3. One in glory

1. One in Love

Jesus says in verse 26 that, “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

In other words, Jesus prays that the perfect love that the Father has for the Son will take root within the hearts of all believers.

Now, I’m a father of four. Obviously, I’m far from a perfect father... but I love my kids as much as I love anything in this world. Even still, my love for my kids is only a tiny fraction of the love that God the Father has for His Son. The Father loves the Son infinite times more than I love my sons.

And the thing is, whatever amount of love I have for my sons can be directly traced back to Jesus’ high priestly prayer here in John 17.

But it’s not just my love for my sons. It’s also my love for my wife, and my family, and my friends, and my church, and my neighbors, and fatherless kids, widows, immigrants, refugees, the homeless, those with special needs, the outcasts, the vulnerable, and yes, even my enemies.

Whatever amount of love that I possess for others is not my own doing. Instead, it is a result of the Father answering the Son’s prayer on my behalf here in John 17.

In his commentary on John, William Barclay says:
“Christian unity transcends all these differences and joins people together in love. The cause of Christian unity at the present time, and indeed all through history, has been injured and hindered, because people loved their own religious organizations, their own creeds, their own ritual, more than they loved each other. If we really loved each other and really loved Christ, no church would exclude anyone who was Christ’s disciple. Only love implanted in our hearts by God can tear down the barriers which we have erected between one another and between our churches.”

First, Jesus prays for us to be one in love.

Second, Jesus prays for us to be...
2. One in Mission

Free Bible study tip: When you read the Bible, always pay close attention to what comes after the “so that.” Because when you see these two words together, it’s a clue of missional language. In our John 17 passage this morning, this phrase “so that” occurs twice in the ESV. Once in verse 21 and again in verse 23.

In verse 21 Jesus prays that they may all be one... SO THAT the world may believe that you have sent me. And then again in verse 23, Jesus prays that they may become perfectly one SO THAT the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

Here, Jesus prays for oneness in the church so that the world may believe and know that God sent Him and loves them.

That’s our mission, Church! To bear testimony through the witness of our oneness that God sent Jesus Christ to the world. Why? Because He loves them.

Our mission is to grow in oneness so that the world may believe and know the love of God in Christ.

And like Jesus was sent, the church has been sent as missionaries to reach a lost, hurting, and broken world.
In Latin, we refer to this concept as the **missio dei**, which means, “the mission of God,” or, “the sending of God.”

In his book, *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch says that the **missio dei** "goes to the heart of the very nature and purpose of the church itself." He continues by saying that “a working definition of missional church is a community of God’s people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God’s mission to the world.”

Jesus prays for us to be one in love, one in mission, and...

Third and finally, Jesus prays for us to be...

3. **One in Glory**

Jesus prays that “The glory that you have given me I have given to them” and that they may, “see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

The word for glory is *doxa* in Greek. This word points toward the splendor, honor, praise, brightness, and beauty of God, and of heaven.

One of the five “solas” of the Protestant Reformation was “soli deo gloria” which means, “To God Alone be the Glory.”

And that’s true from a worship standpoint. We should never pray for ourselves to receive the glory that is reserved for God alone. But what Jesus is praying for here in verses 22 and 24 is not only that we may see God’s glory, but that we may share in God’s glory.

Which means believers in Christ are not just image bearers, we are also glory bearers. We carry the glory of God in us and on us.

In his commentary, DA Carson says that “Jesus has mediated the glory of God, personally to his first followers and through them to those who believe on account of their message…. Christians from every generation glimpse something of Jesus’ glory even now, but one day, when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see him as He is.”
The other day a handful of us were discussing the life cycle of most things we do around here. And the picture that someone drew on the white board was a picture of a bell curve. (show bell curve image).

You start with an idea, you get some funding and initial support. An idea becomes a program, the program grows... But then over time the program eventually it levels out, and it starts to fade, decline or die. So you move onto the next thing.

I’ve actually had a part in launching several ministries that have taken this shape... whether it be Crossover Hoops Ministry, Holmes Gardens outreach, or the PJ5K, or Center Friends mentoring, Lead to Read, Impact Center Schools’ homeless student outreach, etc. Some of these ministries are still accelerating, others have plateaued, and some are dying out or long gone. But this is a common pattern.

And it’s not just true of ministry programs. People, plants, animals, governments, armies, businesses, sports dynasties, retirement funds.

We are born, we grow, we get old, we die. Companies launch, they accelerate, they plateau, they go bankrupt, or get bought out. Governments are birthed, they rise, they get conquered, and they fall.

They say that all good things come to an end, so eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you’ll die. This is the world’s destiny. Work hard and play harder because before long, it’s all going to be over. It’s inevitable.

This picture, while common, does not present the glory of God. See, God comes in and rips this picture off the wall and flips it upside down.

(Show Kingdom Curve image)
God says that as believers, our destiny is up and to the right, but first we’re going to have to die. Because that’s the model of our Lord. It’s the pattern we find in the Bible.

Creation, Fall, Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, Exaltation.

This picture follows the pattern we see in John 16:38, when Jesus said, “I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”

And it also depicts Phil 2:6-11, when Paul said that Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Friends, I’ve got good news. In Christ, you are not destined for a bell-curve. You’re destined for a kingdom curve!

That means that our ministry is incarnational and sacrificial, but it also means that we get to share in Christ’s glory.

God’s glory is ours to enjoy, but before you can share in His glory, you first need to die. Die to what?

What do you need to die to today? What is God asking you to crucify so you can inherit the glory of Christ?

Repentance leads to oneness within the church.

In summary, Jesus prayed that we might be one church that embodies one love, one mission, and one glory.

Close with a prayer from Dr. John Perkins’ book, One Blood:
“Lord God, open our eyes to see Your truth and to believe Your Word. From one man You created all mankind. You made us from one blood. And then You saved us by one blood. The precious blood of Your Son Jesus. Your Word is truth. Help it to penetrate our hearts and our minds. Help it to break through our walls of resistance and those places where we’ve chosen to believe the Enemy’s lies. Break us, Lord. Awaken us, Lord. Make us one.”

Amen.