

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Lord, In Your Mercy

Dr. Jo Forrest

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Today's lectionary reading invites us to listen as Jesus prays to God.

In John's gospel, Jesus' long farewell address to his disciples reminds them how to live and promises God's spirit for strength when they continue his ministry. After so many words directed to them, he pauses, then prays the longest prayer spoken in any gospel. Our reading today is just a very small portion. He prays for those sitting next to him...and us.

Before I read, please pray with me:

Saving God

*We know we live isolated from one another and from you,
aware of our brokenness.*

Send your spirit into these words

that we hear your son's voice as clearly as that last night.

*Open our hearts to join the long legacy of believers
who shaped their lives and our lives from his prayer.*

*Let us find Jesus in all who we meet and
the intimacy with you in all we do.*

Amen.

Gospel of John 17: 1-3, 20-23

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you,² since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.³ And this

is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,

²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved *them* even as you have loved me.

Before Jesus gets up and walks out the door, to the betrayal and death that awaits him, he provides the clearest insight into his desire for those around the table, and all future generations, implying us, and those who will come after us – he wants us to be united in him.

For all those present, he prays they may all be one. As he looks around the table, his followers must appear to have little in common, and yet he prays that they will unite in their belief that he is God’s son, sent to love the whole world.

The Gospel of John’s distinctive witness to Jesus is the community he creates.

Their unity does not come from accepting exterior structures or laws, or dogmas. Jesus actually rejected any such rules. Negotiated policies of who is in or who is out, or minimum standards, fly in the face of his ministry to accept everyone with love.

Although Jesus models loving everyone he meets in his ministry, he knows how hard it can be to love another – not in feeling but in what you do – giving of yourself to another. Therefore, he commands it: Love one another as I have loved you.

Even harder than loving one another is remaining in community. It is so hard that he asks for God's help and lets everyone in the ages hear it.

I'll admit, his prayer feels circular to read and study, with the "I in them" and "you in me." Rather than parse the words for an intellectual understanding, just let them swirl around you, get caught up in a beloved community that begins with God, extends to Jesus, his followers, and invites us. Rather than read his prayer, experience it.

Jesus needs us to be united so much that he prays for God's help.

If the community breaks into fragments, its chaos will undermine God's mission in the world.

Failure to live in unity usually begins by losing sight of our need for one another, someone elevating their loyalty to another cause over and above faith in Jesus, or someone perverts the unity by a thirst for power and control. We also fail to live in the kind of unity Jesus desires when we draw lines and galvanize a dispute into hate or demonize others.

Whenever unity rises from coercion, propaganda, or attempts to eliminate the dissident voice, expect that it comes from a source seeking to dominate others and perhaps us. That kind of unity degenerates into the unity of the mob, the crowd baying for vengeance – the antithesis of Jesus' desire.

Jesus invited his disciples to step beyond their present understanding of themselves, to stand in the doorway to a relationship with God, and to step beyond the current constraints of their culture, faith, and religion to spread God's word to the whole world.

They listened to him pray and became the answers to his prayer.

Five days after the horrific killing in Texas of innocent children and teachers, I'm not sure we continue to unite in sorrow. Even as we sit in sack cloths and ashes with the grieving, too many are drawing sides to defend intractable positions around the crisis of gun violence.

It feels as though our country could not be more divided and yet as soon as I say this some fissure will break apart, polarizing us in more ways.

We divide along partisan loyalties. Not putting God or country first but succumbing to the rhetoric that a smaller faction claims to protect our personal interests.

Regardless of party, voters remain angry at those elected to govern, perceiving they seek to preserve political power rather than serve the will of constituents.

Gun advocates and those seeking gun restraints seem at each other's throats, both sides lacking basic facts because we cannot agree to collect data.

We cannot unite on how to keep our children safe and to everyone's horror, are becoming paralyzed at the repeated shootings in schools.

The only thing we seem to have in common with one another is an all-time unhappiness in this country with the trajectory of where we seem headed.

Perhaps what we've forgotten is that moving forward, united with others and not against them, may ask us to give something of ourselves for a common good.

God's unity is born of an invitation to love one another in a radical, sacrificial way. In John's gospel, Jesus laid down his life for those he loved. Not as a sacrifice for our sin, but because our sinful world could not tolerate God's love spreading. And then God took up his life to prove faith in him is the way to eternal life.

What's worth uniting around?

Keeping our children safe – our very future. In their baptism we commit to support them, by creating a world for them to flourish. Every time I offer the baptismal charge, these children will watch over us in the horizon of our lives and be the ones to carry the faith forward, I get teary with the joy and responsibility.

When we think about Jesus at these crossroads, he is asking us which way are we choosing? Not right or left, but his way. To go his way may separate us from those who fear change, or those who cannot imagine giving up a part of themselves for a greater good.

Let's not let them stop us. They'll catch up.

Jesus prayed that we become one. We bear the responsibility to answer his prayer with our lives.

Henri Nouwen writes:

Prayer and action can never be seen as contradictory or mutually exclude. Prayer without action grows into powerless pietism, and action without prayer degenerates into questionable manipulation. If prayer leads us into deeper unity with the compassionate Christ, it will always give rise to concrete acts of service. And if concrete acts of service do indeed lead us to a deeper solidarity with the grieving, the poor, the hungry, the sick, the dying, we meet Christ.

This Memorial Day weekend we honor those who gave the fullest sacrifice for us – the men and women in the armed forces who died that we might live in democracy and freedom.

People from across our nation, with different ethnic heritages, incomes, education, and families, joined together when our country called. We honor their legacy by claiming it on behalf of future generations. May their heroic courage inspire us to not cower in fear, or acquiesce out of apathy, or presume we cannot make a difference.

If we want to change the way the world is, we must act differently. God will not fix what we have broken. This is our work. It is proper to pray for guidance, wisdom, grace, strength healing, love, insight, courage, etc. Then God will help repair the broken places in the world through us. If we are willing to open ourselves to the will of God, a will that is just and good, then unity and liberation will follow.

Lord, in your mercy.

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer of grief for the million people who died from a pandemic in this country and the families that feel their daily absence.

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer for the wisdom and courage to stand up to all who seek to profit from us rather than serve us.

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer of respect to those soldiers, warriors, sailors, and all in combat who gave so that our country flourishes.

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer as we weep and grieve for the children robbed of innocence and for parents who lay their children's bodies into fresh graves.

Lord, in your mercy. Accept our prayers of thanks that you offer grace to start again, and again.

Lord, in your mercy. Send your spirit to unite us in ways that bring us closer to Jesus and you. The eternal home we seek now and always.

Lord, in your mercy.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org