

## John 17:1-11

<sup>17</sup>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, <sup>2</sup>since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup>And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup>I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup>So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

<sup>6</sup>I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup>Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; <sup>8</sup>for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. <sup>9</sup>I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. <sup>10</sup>All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. <sup>11</sup>And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

## Becoming One in Ministry

Two thousand years has seen a lot of change when it comes to the Church...and despite the many denominations and styles of worship that we see among churches in this country, they really do have a lot in common. I think that for the *majority* of church-goers, their Christian experience is similar: It starts with going to church on Sunday – an experience that would include Sunday School if they have children, standing, sitting, prayers, hymns, a sermon, Holy Communion, and a time to socialize afterwards. The styles of worship can be much different, and the order and the length of the service can be different, the music also can be quite different, but for most Christians their Sunday church experience is pretty much the same. After the service, and after the social hour you go home, hopefully with a sense of peace that you may have gained from your Sunday worship experience – you remind yourself that God is real, that he loves you, that he forgives you, and that everything will come out in the wash. And maybe that good feeling translates into mission – personal mission mostly. The feeling of peace gets passed on to your family and friends, to your pets, and may actually get transmitted during your work week. You may avoid slandering and gossip, and you may help people out when they need help, you may give up your seat on the subway. All this is very good.

But is that the only reason that a church exists? Is the church a sort of spiritual Laundromat where everyone can go once a week to get their spirit cleaned up a bit before Monday rolls around and you find yourself facing the same stress from your job, the same hard-to-get-along-with coworker, the same complaints from customers or families, and before you know it your nice clean spiritual garments start getting dirty again, and by Friday you have ring around the collar. Certainly Sunday worship is a good thing; it *is* a time for us to go and get our shirts cleaned, to confess our sins and receive assurance that we're forgiven, to be reassured that

God is good, that we are his children, that he loves us a lot. Isn't that enough? Hasn't the church fulfilled its mission if people can come and get laundered on Sundays?

Well such a question leads to another question: *What was Jesus' mission?* Was Jesus sent from God in order to let us know that God loves us and forgives us? Did Jesus come to let us know that no matter how bad things get, God is on your side? *Did Jesus get sent to the cross for being nice and for telling others to be nice?* Were people just so mean back in his day that they said, "Jesus is telling folks to be nice; we can't have THAT! We gotta get rid of this guy."

No. In fact there were just as many nice folks back then as there are today, people who would treat each other kindly, people who would give you food if you were hungry, clothing if you were naked. Hospitality was expected of others in most every culture; you didn't need a messiah to tell you to be a good neighbor. In fact people might have been more hospitable back then than they are now. Most religions and philosophies taught people to be kind to one another.

So what *did* Jesus come for, and what did he get sent to the cross for? It's important that we answer that because we are the church, we are presumably his disciples, and Jesus has said to us that anyone who wants to follow him must take up their cross daily and follow him, and the cross that he's talking about is no different from the cross that he carried. Whatever Jesus did is what the Church needs to do, and that is more than making people feel good, feel loved, and feel forgiven. It's more than telling people to be nice to other people in the confines of your own social or professional circle. Jesus says that even people who rob other people are nice to each other, and family is nice to family. Jesus expects more than loving your enemies, though it's important for us to try to do that; certainly Jesus didn't get sentenced to die for loving his enemies – in fact his enemies would welcome such a message when most Jews considered the Romans to be their enemies. So what did Jesus come for? What did he get sent to the cross for?

Jesus got crucified because he was instigating a revolution. It was not the kind of revolution that the world was used to, one that involved swords and knives and shields, but it was in every other way a revolution. Jesus declared that God's kingdom had come, and he invited people to join his "army," an army whose only weapon was the Holy Spirit. He declared that God, not Herod, not Caesar, ruled his heart and his mind, and that God – not Herod and not Caesar – ruled the hearts and minds of all who belonged to God's kingdom. And this didn't sit well with some folks; particularly it didn't sit well with Herod or with Caesar. There were plenty of people who didn't *like* Jesus out of professional jealousy – people really loved him more than they loved the high priest or the Sanhedrin, but that's not what got him crucified. It was the Romans, not the Jews, who killed him, and *how* they killed him is important to take note of; after they flogged him senseless, they put a purple robe and a crown of thorns on him, and they punched him and mocked him saying, "Hail King of the Jews." And on the cross to which his body was nailed they put a plaque that read "Jesus of Nazareth; King of the Jews." Their point was not only to humiliate and torture Jesus; it was to *discredit* his own claim to be the king of the Jews, and to serve as a warning to anyone who aspired to challenge the Roman emperor. Rome would not have crucified anyone for telling people to be nice to each other. Rome would not

have crucified anyone for telling them to love their enemies No, Jesus was crucified because the message that he spread was about an alternative kingdom, about a kingdom where he was indeed king.

This is a point that really validates a lot of what is said in the New Testament about Jesus' understanding of his own identity as king of not only the Jews but of this world. People who say, "Jesus never thought himself to be anything more than a great teacher or healer; his disciples got carried away; it was the Church that labeled Jesus a God." Those people are ignoring the entire reason for his crucifixion: His claim of God's kingdom on earth was seen as a rebellion against the kingdom that currently held the reins of power. And that was indeed the reason why so many of his disciples also ended up being killed. It had nothing to do with being a nice guy on a local level – no one would have stopped him from being nice and teaching others to be nice. What got him in trouble was the message that was behind his niceness – GOD'S KINGDOM HAS COME, and I'm the one who has brought it here.

And so, by extension, we – you and I – as Christians, that is, disciples of Jesus Christ – we are not merely tasked with being nice to people, though that is a good place to start. No, we are tasked with proclaiming God's kingdom in word and in deed. We are charged with fixing what is broken in this world. This is a surprise to many Christians who think that it's all about being nice and "believing" in Jesus as the one who died for our sins, so that we can have eternal life. Well I hate to be the spoiler, but eternal life is now, just as the kingdom of God is now. Yes, it is about *believing* in Jesus, but believing in him means that you follow him, and following him means that you do what he tells us to do, which is to declare that God's kingdom has come on earth as it is in heaven, and to work to make that kingdom evident.

Sunday worship is an essential part of a Christian's life, and it may be the only connection you can afford to have with the church – your Mondays-through-Saturdays may be so packed with meetings and appointments, with children's soccer practices and dance recitals, but the Church does a lot of other things from Monday through Saturday. That's one of the reasons our church considers worship planning and presentation an important ministry because, frankly, most of you have other things going on Monday thru Saturday, so it is important that your spirit be renewed during your time here, that you are reminded of God's presence and God's love, that you feel part of a family that does not judge you discriminate against you when you're here, that you leave here feeling refreshed, cleansed, inspired, so that you can do the good work for God's kingdom by being a light to your family and coworkers and everyone you encounter over the next six days. Worship is very important.

But there are so many other ministries of the church, because our mission is so immense – preparing the way for God's kingdom. That's why we send missionaries to countries where people don't have access to good food and clean water and a decent education. That's why we prepare meals for people who come hungry to Project Hospitality, that's why we collect non-perishable food for the South Shore Food Pantry, it's why we are involved in the Staten Island Council of Churches that just presented six folks with \$500 scholarships to help them with the cost of their education, it's why we hold special worship services through the South Shore

Methodist Council to raise money for disaster relief in the United States and abroad, it's why we conduct a Sunday School to teach our young children about God's love and the marvelous hope that all Christians share of God's Kingdom come on earth as in heaven. And yes, it's why we get involved with complicated issues of social justice; I get invited to city planning meetings and NYPD training and community affairs meetings because people in government know that clergy are instrumental in creating a better society, and they need to hear our people's concerns, because history has shown us that laws and policies can discriminate and harm the people and can completely overlook the needs of the most vulnerable, who are so often the people who come to church to find solace and refuge – people we may not see in our nice neighborhoods, but people who need help and someone to speak on their behalf. And so yes, the church is invited to be involved in social justice issues for the good of all people and for the glory of God whose kingdom we construct.

And you may not have the time or the ability to directly engage in any ministry at Bethel, but that's okay. You have jobs and commitments that keep you busy Monday through Saturday, so your ministry is carried out in your home, or at work, or wherever you spend your time. And your tithes and offerings are what support all those other ministries that I just talked about. You fund those who cook meals for Project Hospitality. You buy the Sunday School books. You pay for me to go work in Haiti or in Midland Beach or wherever. You don't have to give up your current commitments to follow Jesus and to be involved in the ministries of this church. But I want you to recognize the incredible mission of the church. It's huge, and you are a part of it. Even though worship or a children's Sunday School may be your reason for coming to Bethel, and even though your personal ministry may be restricted to your family, your co-workers, and your neighbors, remember that you are also helping the church do things in other places, tending to the least of these and struggling to bring about changes that will benefit ALL of God's children.

So the sermon title was Becoming One in Ministry. I'm here to tell you that being one in ministry does not mean that you have to be involved in every ministry that Bethel is involved in. You don't have to quit your job or belong to a committee or attend Bible Studies or mission trips or protest rallies or community council meetings – as I said, your ministry may be confined to your own busy life Monday thru Saturday. But I want you to appreciate the big picture, and when you look at our upcoming schedule and you see I'm going to a workshop on Sanctuary Churches, or someone is going to a vigil or memorial service or a Council of Churches meeting, or a friendship dinner, or is preparing a meal for Project Hospitality, *you can pray. You can encourage them while you're here on Sundays. You can ask questions and express your concerns, and offer your input.*

And being one in ministry does not mean that you agree with every position that the pastor or the church council takes – we try to keep you informed of what we're doing and what we're thinking of doing, and we encourage you to share – I was so pleased to hear from one member this week who had great concerns about some of the stances our church was taking on some rather controversial issues; we were able to dialogue and better understand each other, and come out of our discussion knowing that we were still friends. It was actually John Wesley who

first used the expression “let us agree to disagree.” But while we may disagree on many things, we still are united in Christ, and in our pursuit of God’s kingdom. My friends, let us agree to disagree, and let us always recognize the colossal mission of the Church, keeping that vision of God’s perfect kingdom forever in front of us that such vision would drive our every word and action to God’s glory. Amen.