Sermon AMC- Jesus’ Farewell Prayer for the Church

Scripture: John 17 Sunday, November 12, 2017

I have been preaching through a 4 part series on the church taken from the four elements of church we see in Acts chapter 2. The first sermon was on fellowship- being family together, the second was on breaking bread together, a symbolic act where we remember Christ’s sacrifice and also own Christ’s sacrifice in a way that draws us closer to Christ. Today I am going to talk about the third essential element of church, prayer. But I am going to do it by carefully listening in on our Lord praying, at the conclusion of his earthly ministry. This is also called Jesus’ high priestly prayer. It is the largest recorded prayers of Jesus, found only in the Gospel of John. As we begin I want to say a few more things about the context of this prayer in Jesus’ life and in the context where we are in the book of John itself.

So this prayer is uttered at the end of his earthly ministry and just before he dies on the cross. In fact if you look at its position in the Gospel of John, the last supper foot washing takes place in chapter 13, then the Gospel spends the rest of chapter 13 and all of 14, 15 and 16 prophesying and doing his last bit of teaching. He predicts his betrayal, denial and death and the world’s opposition to him. But he also prophesies about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He presents his last I AM saying and talks about the coming transformation of sadness to joy. In fact his teaching section ends with one of my most favorite passages in all of the Bible, John 16:33, “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many troubles and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.” Then Jesus finishes teaching and he stops and he turns to his heavenly father and starts praying. But before we dive into the content of the prayer, there is one more clue about where he is praying that is important to establish. You see in chapter 18 at the end of the prayer it says he crossed the Kidron valley to enter the olive grove. That is a very specific clue as to where Jesus was praying. Because the Kidron valley is on the East side of the Old City of Jerusalem. The Kidron Valley separates the Temple of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. So if after his prayer in John 17 he is immediately crossing the Kidron Valley that means he was at the temple when we was praying this prayer. And that gives us a very important cue in understanding this prayer better. You see is Jesus stops at the temple to pray this prayer just before his crucifixion, that means Jesus is praying this prayer as the high priest of the world, before he performs this sacrifice for the whole world. That is why this prayer is called Jesus’ high priestly prayer.

(The prayer itself is too deep and profound for us to fully understand it. There are many themes being addressed and many connections between themes that can be confusing. But there is a one pattern within all of these interrelated themes that I want to bring to your attention today. )

I want to start with a phrase found in verse 18, the first part. It says, “just as you **sent** me into the world, I am sending them into the world”. For now just focus on the first part, “just as you sent me into the world”. I want you to focus just on the word “**sent**”. You see in this phrase Jesus is revealing something about God. He is revealing that God is a missionary God by his very nature. Jesus coming to earth was not a reaction to the sin problem or something God was forced to do because he ran out of options. Remember God came and walked in the midst of human beings even before they sinned and messed up. You see God always wanted to hang out with us. It is just that, hanging out with human beings became impossible after the entry of sin and rebellion in the human realm. But because God was a missionary God, who is always going or sending, God sends his son Jesus on a mission to our realm. This is one of the things that Jesus reveals to us about God. And what is the divine purpose of this mission? That is one of the first things Jesus prays about. As Jesus begins his prayer, he looks up to his father in heaven and says, “father the hour has come, to complete the mission”. Then in verse 6 he says, “ I have revealed you to the ones you gave me”. So one dimension of Jesus’ mission was to reveal God to human beings. Another dimension of Jesus’ mission was to grant eternal life to human beings.” Verse 2 he says, “he (meaning himself) gives eternal life to each one you have given him”. A third dimension of his mission was to reclaim God’s authority and glory. Verse 2 says, “For you have given him authority over everyone,”. Then in verse 4 he says, “I brought glory to you here on earth by completing the work you gave me to do”. So Jesus’ mission was to reveal God to the elect, to give eternal life to those who believe, and to reclaim the authority and glory of God on earth. So as Jesus prays is very clear about his mission. Jesus is also very clear about his authority for this mission. In verse 2 he prays, “for ***you*** (his Heavenly Father) have given me this authority over everyone”. Jesus also remembers that his authority is over all human beings just as He is about to give Himself into their hands.

So in the the opening of this pray, Jesus remembers his mission, he remembers where his authority comes from and he remembers whom his authority is over.

After looking at his mission and authority, I want to turn to his petitions. The first petition I want to focus on is his petition for glorification. This can be a little difficult to relate to especially for us Mennonites, right. Because thankfully we don’t hear people praying “Glorify me”. So let me just address this. First of all, the question that arises is that, “glorify me” does not sound like the words a humble or f modesty person would use. Both humility and modesty are both strong Biblical values and values important to the Mennonites as well. Paul in Romans 12:3 writes, “Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don’t think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.[[1]](#footnote-1) “. So the first thing to see in this is that the Biblical value to see in this is to have a realistic measure of ourself. But on the other hand, the things of God have great value. And things of great value have to be given great importance. The problem with a fallen world is that, this world gets its values all messed up. In this world we have celebrities who are famous and make millions of dollars just because they made a sex tape that got leaked on the internet, which was then viewed by millions of people. We live in a world were very worldy and superficial things are lifted up. Material possessions, physical looks, self-promotion, these things are given great importance. And the things that truly have value, the things of God are diminished. In fact the enemy will try to go all the way to even question God’s existence. When the Word of God is ignored and the world runs after random celebrities, you know that we live in a world that cannot distinguish between what is important and not important, what is good and not good, what is right and what is wrong. And this level of confusion can only lead to destruction.

Let me give you a quick example. Now you can see the exit signs in this building right? They are a solid light box with the words EXIT clearly marked and glowing in red light. What if though, some random person put up another EXIT sign. This sign was simply the words exit written on paper in bright red and stuck on the wall here to the side. Now imagine, if the people in this building did not have the ability to distinguish between the real Exit sign and the fake one, what would happen in a real emergency? People would not know which direction to run to and if they ran in the wrong direction, it would lead straight to the loss of lives right? If people cannot distinguish between what is real value and what is fake it is nothing less than a matter of life and death. So for Jesus to come into this world to restore His authority and glory was very much connected to his mission of saving the world. And the Father and Son are equal in honor in heaven. John 5 says 21 “For just as the Father gives life to those he raises from the dead, so the Son gives life to anyone he wants. 22In addition, the Father judges no one. Instead, he has given the Son absolute authority to judge”, So you see the authority of the son? John 5 verse 23 continues, 23 “so that everyone will honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son is certainly not honoring the Father who sent him”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Do you see the honor due to the son there?

That is why he prays, “glorify your Son so he can give glory back to you”. And I want you to remember this. The Son always had glory in heaven. To come as a human being into this world, he had to temporarily set aside his glory. Jesus is now getting ready to return to his heavenly glory. But the whole point of coming to earth was so that he would be glorified on earth as well. And that is nothing less than a matter of life and death for those who live on earth. So Jesus sincerely pleads that this part of his mission, the restoration of his authority and glory here on earth may be accomplished.

There is another petition that Jesus makes in this prayer that I want us to look at today. That is his prayer for his church to be united. In verse 11 we read “Now I am departing from the world; they are staying in this world but I am coming to you. Holy Father, you have given me your name, now protect them by the power of your name, so that they will be united just as we are”. If you listening in to this prayer, you can see the wheels turning in Jesus’ mind as he foresees church history playing out. Jesus can see his church grow exponentially, but with that growth Jesus can also see all kinds of divisions emerging within the church. And unless this new institution that he founded acts differently from the other human institutions its ability to be a witness to the nature of God is limited. So what does the world wide church of today look like. Well, today the latest year I could find the data on was 2010. There are 2.2 billion people. That represents a third of the world’s population and the largest religion group in the world. Now these 2.2 billion people are organized in 40,000 denominations. But when you look at it a little further, it is not that these so called denominations actually believe something very different. If you look at the mega-blocks we have 6 major categorizations, Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants, Independents and Marginals. Within these 6 mega-blocks there are many variations.

In every denomination there is a conservative part and a liberal part. The conservative section wants to uphold the authority of the scripture closely and the liberal part wants to be able to be freer with what parts of scripture they uphold and what they don’t pay much attention to. Do you know that the conservatives of one denomination have more in common with the conservatives of a different denomination than they have with the liberals of the same denomination. That means that there are only two major denominations, liberals and conservatives. And within the conservative and liberal spectrum, if you really dig in, you don’t get real difference in belief as much as difference in emphasis. So for example if you go to a big cathedral and attend an Anglican service, you will come away with the transcendence of God, his greatness, if you were to do to a Black Baptist church you would experience the power of God, if you went to a Presbyterian church you will see the intellect of God, in the Mennonite church with the testimonies and peace witness you see the character of God and experience the intimacy of God. Every denomination only have the capacity to emphasis one or two things about God. If you want to experience all of God, you will have to attend every kind of worship service there is and that is why we have an eternity to do that in heaven. So don’t let the number of denominations fool you into thinking that Jesus’ plea for unity was not answered at all. Considering that the larger church is 2.5 billion people spanning the whole globe, the fact that the variation in churches around the globe is no little is miraculous. But you can think of it this way. Even within the Godhead we can see three different denominations, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are all God and when we look at the Father we see the one who is the power and authority or God, when we look at the Son we see the love or God when we see the Holy Spirit we see the omnipresence of God. But all three have all of these attributes and more, it is just that we tend to see some attributes more in one than the other. But there is great unity in the God head. They work as one. And when we within our church and across churches and denominations can partner together and work as one then we communicate something of the unity in the Trinity to the world around us. That is what Jesus meant as he prayed, in verse 20 “I pray that they may be one, just as we are one”. In fact this church unity was so important to Jesus that he tells his Father, “I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one just as we are one.” Remember I talked about how giving glory to God on earth is a matter of life and death for human beings. Well, now Jesus is saying, he imparts glory to the church. And this glory that the church on earth has because of Jesus Christ is the power also to bring us together. And finally Jesus prays, as the church experiences this unity, the world will see how much you love the church. In verse 23 Jesus prays, “May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.”

We don’t control what other churches and denominations do, but we can take Jesus’ farewell prayer for us to heart. We can be representatives of this God who sent his Son and who is now sending us on a mission. What is this mission? To bring glory to God in our own heart, then in our home, then in our neighborhoods, workplaces and everywhere than God sends us. And while we do that, we need to make sure that Jesus’ plea for unity will not be something that we take lightly. Let the world know that God loves us by our togetherness in mission and togetherness in love for each other. Let us pray.

1. Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). [*Holy Bible: New Living Translation*](https://ref.ly/logosres/nlt?ref=BibleNLT.Ro12.3&off=2&ctx=ing+and+perfect.+%0a3%C2%A0~Because+of+the+privi) (Ro 12:3). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). [*Holy Bible: New Living Translation*](https://ref.ly/logosres/nlt?ref=BibleNLT.Jn5.20&off=191&ctx=truly+be+astonished.~+21%C2%A0For+just+as+the+) (Jn 5:20–23). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)