

“The Beautiful Community”
John 17:20-26
March 7, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

Though the word “beauty” doesn’t appear in our passage, its idea permeates this chapter. It is found in the oft-repeated word “glory,” a word that occurs in various forms eight times in John 17. To say that God is glorious is to say that he is full of beauty. Beauty is attractational. We want to gaze upon it, replicate it and enjoy it. The psalmist said it well. **“One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple”** (Psalm 27:4). We have a new and growing expense that is making a regular appearance on our monthly credit card statement. It is an expense from a company that takes our digital photos and makes print copies of them in postcard format. Wendy and I both find these photos beautiful because they are of our grandchildren. When we find something beautiful, we want to replicate it.

Strikingly, our passage teaches that the beauty of the Lord is replicated in his Church. **“The glory [beauty] that you have given me I have given to them”** (v. 22). To the extent that the Church reflects the beauty of the Lord, she draws people to the Lord. That’s where this passage fits into our theme of the mission of the Church. The primary feature of this beauty that we want to focus on this morning is that of unity, which Jesus prays for when he prays for his church. Jesus says twice that when the Church is marked by unity, the result is that the world will believe that Jesus has been sent by the Father (v. 21, 23). It is through the unity of the church that she will see evangelistic effectiveness. The Bible teaches elsewhere that Jesus is still praying for his church, and we can be sure that the content of his prayer has not changed. So let’s look more closely at this unity that he prayed for in John 17 and continues to pray for today.

I. Unity’s Definition

Jesus began his prayer by praying for his eleven disciples, and now he moves to pray for all those who would believe in him through their word. In other words, he is praying for the Church through all ages. The Church is formed by believing in the word of God that came through the apostles. His prayer is for unity, **“that they may all be one.”** This is the main thing Jesus prays for here, and he prays for it twice (v. 21, 23). If you had only one prayer request you could make to cover two-thousand plus years of church history, would you pray for church unity? Jesus does.

What is this unity Jesus prays for? He defines it by identifying it with the unity within the trinity—**“just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.”** What is this relationship between the Father and the Son? Two qualities of it apply to us: mutual love and unity of purpose. Since the Father and the Son love one another completely, our unity is deepened as we learn to love one another more fully. There is also unity of purpose and desires. The Father and the Son want the same things.

This past year has brought challenges to the unity of the church, both at AVPC and throughout our nation. But I think it is important to note how much of the core of our unity is still strong. There have been multiple and continual acts of love going on in this church just during the past year. Our family has been the beneficiary of that as we experienced an outpouring of love after Wendy’s shoulder surgery and after the death of her mom. Our meal ministry has been working overtime, and it’s been beautiful to see so many expressions of love in ways too numerous to recount. There is also a great deal of unity of purpose in our congregation. The political arena has been such a focus of division both in the nation and the church. Yet there is far more we agree on than disagree, and the points of agreement are about much more significant issues. We all want our nation to thrive in every possible way. We all want to see justice done. We are all pro-life, anti-racism and pro-marriage.

There is one more important point about unity here that I think we need to pay attention to. Because the unity Jesus prays for is likened to the unity within the trinity, we can know that unity is not the same as uniformity. The trinity is marked by unity of essence, love and purpose, but also contains distinct persons. God is one in essence but three in persons. In other words, there is unity amidst diversity within the trinity. Unity doesn’t mean that all of our parents need to make the same choice for the schooling of their children. It doesn’t mean that we all need to read the same translation of the Bible, prefer the same style of worship, or have the same political views.

It is this area of politics that has been the occasion of some disunity in our church, and we need to talk about it some. Given the fact that politics has been such a source of disunity in our nation as a whole, it is not surprising that the church battles this as well. Let’s talk about just one aspect of this—the way Christians voted in the last presidential election. All of us love our country and want what is best for her. All of us are pro-life in our views about abortion. Some among us decided that voting for Donald Trump was the vote that best reflected these values. They may be right, or they may be wrong. Others among us decided that a vote for Joe Biden best reflected our shared values. They may be right, or they may be wrong. But in either case, it was a political calculation that the Bible would classify as an area of Christian liberty. While political issues are more important than whether you might be an Auburn or Alabama fan, they are much closer to one’s football loyalty than to our unity in Christ. If you voted for Donald Trump in the last election, there was no sin in doing so. If you voted for Joe

Biden, there was no sin in doing so. But what is sinful is breaking fellowship with another believer because they happened to vote for a different candidate than you. To say the same thing in a positive way, our unity in Christ allows for diversity in our political views.

Steve Brown has a memorable illustration of this. He says that when a group of thoroughbred horses face attack, they stand in a circle facing each other and with their back legs kick out at the enemy. Donkeys do just the opposite; they face the enemy and kick each other. Let's not be donkeys. Let's face the enemy of political divisiveness by standing together, united in opposition to our true enemy rather than making the mistake of thinking that others in the church are our enemies.

II. Unity's Result

Twice in our passage we read that evangelistic effectiveness results from this unity. He says it the same way both times. The unity of the church results in the world believing that the Father sent the Son (v. 21, 23). If the Father sent the Son, that means that the Son is a faithful spokesman for God. It means that everything Jesus said comes with divine authority. It means that Jesus is to be believed, and it is through believing in Jesus that men and women become new creations in Christ.

Church unity leads to evangelistic fruit because it reflects the beauty of God. The people of God coming together in unity should be the place where unbelievers can see what God is like. They can see what true love is. They can see the reversal of the Tower of Babel, where mankind was divided. But now in Christ, we can come back together. Seen from this perspective, the deep divisions we are seeing in our nation right now are actually wonderful opportunities for outreach. We can show the world the transforming power of Christ in our lives as the world sees people who love one another in spite of political disagreements.

On one of my trips to Uganda several years ago, I spent some time with two American missionaries who struggled to get along with one another. They told of a time when they had to take a five- or six-hour trip together in the middle of a big conflict they were having with one another. I need to explain that when traveling in Uganda by private vehicle, as these two were traveling, it is expected that you will never travel without a completely full vehicle. So they picked up passengers along the way from Bundibugyo to Fort Portal, and one Ugandan man sat in the cab of the truck with them while they were working through this conflict, which they were doing for the entire trip of six hours. As it turned out, the man wasn't a believer in Christ, and he said at the end of the trip that he now knew there must be something to Christianity. The reason he gave for this conclusion was that he had never seen two men love one another enough to work through such a deep conflict.

III. Unity's Source

Where do we get such unity? The simple answer is that we get it from being joined to Jesus by faith. If twenty-five pianos are all tuned to the same tuning fork, all 25 will also be in tune with one another. Does this passage help us know how we can be joined to Jesus and find our unity in him? I believe it does, and it is found in the often-repeated word "glory."

There are two senses of that word in this chapter. The first is the glory of heaven and the second the glory of submission. In verse 22 Jesus prays, **"The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one as we are one."** Unity comes as a result of being given glory. How does the gift of glory lead to unity? In order to understand this, we have to understand that man was made for glory. Psalm 8:5 says that God created man **"a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor."** There is something deep inside us that wants glory because that's the way we've been designed by our Maker. The contrast between following Jesus and not following him isn't that followers of Jesus renounce glory while others seek it. The difference rather is between bestowed glory and acquired glory. Did you notice what Jesus said in that verse about how we get glory? **"I have given them the glory."** It is the effort to acquire glory outside of God's gift that becomes the problem. Most try to acquire glory through being right and looking good. I'm something of an expert on this for the simple reason that I have many years of practice in seeking glory in this way. And it continues to be a daily battle. It is this effort to achieve glory by self-effort that leads to disunity. We want to be seen as right, so we don't listen to anyone who may disagree with us. If we listen to them, it may be revealed that we are wrong, and our ego is too fragile to admit of that possibility. And if we want glory through looking good, it makes of others our competitors. To look good gets reduced simply to looking better than another.

Jesus says that true glory is given and not achieved by our effort. This is gospel truth, and our unity depends on our hearing of these words. What words do you hear? Do you hear those words of shame from the evil one? Do you hear him say to you, "You are such a screwup! You can't do anything right. You're an embarrassment to the cause of Christ. You're just fundamentally more flawed than all those other Christians at AVPC. You're too fat. You're too thin. You'll never amount to much of anything." These are powerful lies that can only be silenced by true gospel words. Jesus says "I have given them glory." He says, "My people are in us, the Father and the Son, with the same intimacy existing within the trinity. This would be an outrageous statement coming from anyone other than Jesus. How does one gain entry into exclusive clubs? It usually has to be by invitation from an existing member. You can't just walk up and say, "I want to be part of your club." And here the most exclusive club in the universe, the fellowship of the trinity, is opened to those being given this gift from Jesus. And

there are so many more gospel words indicating this glory we have been given. **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Ro. 8:1). **“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation”** (2 Cor. 5:17).

There is a second meaning of the word “glory” in this chapter, seen in the first words of Jesus’ prayer. **“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.”** Whenever Jesus speaks of his “hour” he is referring to his crucifixion. This is the glory of submission. Jesus submitted to his Father even when it led him to the cross. There is something quite powerful that happens when we submit to God in the hard places of life. Paradoxically, doing so takes us to glory. Henri Nouwen went from a place of celebrated ministry to serving in a home for developmentally disabled adults. They didn’t know who he was and were not at all impressed with his significant credentials. Nouwen wrote, “These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things, and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments. I am telling you this because I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self.”

We follow Jesus into glory by following him into death. Paradoxically, we come to glory by submitting to God when he leads us into inglorious places. It is quite inglorious to admit to oneself that you are a sinner without any hope of rescuing yourself. But that is precisely the confession we all must make. It takes us to glory, and it takes us to unity. And when we are taken to unity, we become the beautiful community God designed us to be. We become a glorious temple where God lives.

CONCLUSION:

Tom Hunley is a deacon in a PCA church in Kentucky, and also an acclaimed poet. Many of his poems are in the form of prayers, and one such prayer describes the time he and his wife learned that their son, Evan, was autistic. *My son couldn’t speak for years,/ and when the doctor said Autism/I couldn’t speak, and forgive me,/ I turned my head from him./ I know You’ll understand. Forgive me/for reminding You how You turned Your head/while Your Son hung there.* The Father turned his face away from the Son, that we might one day see his face of glory. May this glory which has been given to us work among us a deep unity!

Small Group Discussion Questions
John 17:20-26

1. Our passage this week is on the unity Jesus prays for his church. Can you think of someone with whom you have experienced the kind of unity Jesus speaks of in spite of significant differences you might have with that person? Perhaps these differences are rooted in educational level, personality, economic differences, political differences or just very different backgrounds.
2. What do you think explains the unity Christians have in spite of differences that may exist between them?
3. The relationship of the Father and Son is the standard for our unity. On the positive side, this unity involves a mutual love and a unity of purpose. Take a few minutes to share with one another how you have experienced this kind of unity at AVPC. In other words, what have been some tangible expressions of mutual love here?
4. On the negative side, unity is not uniformity. The trinity is completely united, but also distinct in personality (one God and three persons). There is both unity and diversity. What are some common ways you have seen Christians seek uniformity in order to achieve unity? For example, some churches make people feel that all parents should homeschool their children. They don't make room for diversity and instead seek unity by means of uniformity.
5. What do you think would be required for Christians to sit down and discuss their political differences while maintaining mutual love and unity? Is there some change needed in your life to make this more likely to happen?
6. Jesus says that it is glory that leads to this unity. "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one" (v. 22). Review for one another the glories of the gospel that you find most significant.
7. Close by joining your voice to that of Jesus in praying for the unity of the church.