

What Jesus really wants from us
Sermon for Ascension Day – John 17:20-26



²⁰ “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that 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. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I 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. ²⁴Father, 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. ²⁵O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I 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.”

When a close relative dies, it is common for people to seem eager to do everything the deceased person had always wanted. “That’s what she would have wanted” is the pious phrase one often hears from relatives. It’s strange that the deceased person is completely unaware of this fulfillment of their wish or even know anything about it at all. People seem to know the deceased’s wishes only once they can no longer do anything good for that person. Yet, people fulfill the deceased’s wishes with great zeal.

In today’s sermon text, we gain insight into the final wish of our Lord Jesus Christ. The situation is as follows: shortly before His execution and shortly before His death on the cross, He prays. But He prays in such a way that the disciples can hear His entire prayer. Otherwise, John would not have been able to write down this prayer. It is as if Jesus deliberately wants His disciples and us to hear what He is praying. He also wants us to understand what His deepest desire is for us Christians. In the first verses of John 17, He focuses entirely on the disciples gathered around Him and prays for them. Then Jesus expands the prayer to include all Christians of every generation. Since we have just read this text, this is also Jesus’ prayer for us today. What is Jesus’ deepest desire for us today? He wants us Christians to be one! When we hear this, we should all feel ashamed today for we have not fulfilled Christ’s desire. Churches around the world are divided. Even within a single congregation, there is, unfortunately, so often strife and discord. This is a very sad reality that we must live with. Quite obviously, Christian unity was very important to Jesus. Yet what is even more important is the foundation of this unity. If we follow Jesus’ gaze, we come directly to the heavenly Father. In the heavenly Father, we find the source and origin of the unity we are meant to have. It is not that Jesus looks at His diverse disciples and now wants to bring them together by any means possible. The direction is different. It is grounded in God. Without this unity of God, there is no unity among us Christians either. It is worth taking a moment longer to look at the unity of God. God’s nature is truly, in itself, a miracle of unity. In God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each distinct persons.

They are so closely united that we can say in a single sentence, “God is simultaneously one, and three persons.” This is because there is no power struggle whatsoever within God. God’s very nature is a perfect giving and receiving. God is in no way at odds with Himself regarding His will and His purpose. For example, Jesus submits Himself completely to God’s will. He humbles Himself even to the cross. God exalts Him again and Jesus takes His place at the right hand of God. As can be seen from Jesus’ path,

God's nature was and always is mutual love and devotion. Because love always needs a counterpart, God was never just one person. Yet at the same time, God was and is one.

The greatest miracle is that Jesus includes us Christians in this unity. His will is that we be with God. Jesus' will is that we be filled with the same love and affection that is part of God's very nature. He wants us to be part of this! "24Father, 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." The unity Jesus speaks of here is essentially connected to God. When we read the rest of the New Testament, we find the same basis for the unity of the Church. It should not be grounded in merely structural unity, because it would not be true unity if we were to force or break all denominations down into a single melting pot. That would not be the kind of unity that springs from the very nature of God. The question is, what is it that connects us to this God? The answer to this question is God's Word, through which He connects with us. Jesus says in His prayer in that, "22The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one..." The word "glory" is important in the Bible. Most people don't even know what it actually means and confuse glory with earthly wealth or fame. We think that movie stars or billionaires possess glorious wealth, but that is not at all the Biblical meaning of the word. Originally, it meant "heaviness" or "weight;" something very heavy and anchored to the ground so that it cannot be overturned. Above all, the Bible teaches that God's Word is so firm and certain that it always accomplishes what it says. God's Word cannot be overturned. God created the entire world through His Word, and we see this same glory in Jesus. Jesus spoke a word, and Lazarus rose. Even the sea obeyed Jesus' command. Through Jesus, God has sent the final word to us. In doing so, he has given us a secure foundation on which we can rely. He has given us His glory. Everything else in our world is uncertain. People come and go. People make many promises and can just as quickly break those promises. But God's Word, unlike human words, is firm and certain. Jesus' work for us on the cross is firm and certain. Through this we are united with the eternal God. Through this we are one. Through this we have God's glory, and we always seek the unity of the Church precisely in this place.

One could also say that for us, God's glory means that we are with God. God wants us to be with Him and remain with Him. This unity we have in Jesus holds yet another promise within it. When the world sees the unity we have in Jesus and God, it understands that God loves them too. It is this language of love that every person can understand. That was also the disciples' task: to pass on this love. Back then, as they gazed intently at the sky, they could have immediately established a cult of the Ascension right then and there. The disciples could have built a temple and spent the rest of their lives thinking about the glorious Ascension of Jesus. But they did not do that. The angel had already said to them, "Why are you looking at the sky? Go and do what Jesus said." Love the world as He has loved you.

Amen.