

**Sermon preached by Mr. Nathanael de Poix at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 28, 2008**

WHY THE CHURCH?

John 17:20-26

Well it is good to be with you all this morning. Before we get started, I want to let you in on a little secret that's not really a secret: I talk fast. It's true and I know it. I also know that you know it. I talk really fast – sometimes with speeds up to 180 miles per hour and wind gusts that may blow you temporarily off course. At times when I get excited it might seem like you're trying to take a drink from a fire hydrant. It is no secret and I am well aware of this.

Friends, I get excited when talking about Jesus. Plain and simple. So I'll make you a deal: I'll try to slow down for you and you try to keep up. Hopefully we'll meet somewhere in the middle. But you snooze even for a second – enjoy the dust!

Please turn with me now to the Gospel of John, the 17th chapter. We will be studying verses 20-26 this morning. Now hear the Word of the Lord:

20 My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

24 Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

25 Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. 26 I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.

If time were not an issue we would read, reflect and dissect Jesus' entire prayer which spans all of John 17. This beautiful prayer which Jesus offers up to His Father comes just days before His glorification on the Cross. Also referred to as "the high priestly prayer," it is most easily broken down into three parts: Jesus prays for Himself, verses 1-5; then He prays for His disciples, verses 6-19; and then He closes in prayer for all believers, verses 20-26. However, time is an issue, so we will focus our study today on the final portion of Jesus' prayer. Therefore, I urge you to make some sacred space in your week to revisit and reflect upon the longest prayer by Jesus recorded in Scripture. It summarizes much of Jesus' purpose and desires in His earthly ministry.

Today we will just scratch the surface of this dense text, as we focus in particular on today's overarching question: "Why the church?" We will answer this question by breaking it down into four sub-questions, using John 17 as our backdrop:

- What is the church?
- What are the desires Jesus has for the church?

- What's the status of the church? In other words, how are we doing in light of Christ's desires for His church?
- What does all this mean for you?

1. WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

The term 'church' is primarily used in one of two ways: The more common function of the word in our day – especially in the U.S. – denotes physical structures intended for worship. This definition normally represents some sort of building where people come to offer praise unto the Lord corporately, such as this one. However, the truest essence of “the church” as outlined in Scripture – also often referred to metaphorically as the Body of Christ – is defined by Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology* as “*the community of all true believers for all time.*”

In other words, the church is not necessarily a physical edifice, but a community encompassing all Christians from yesterday, today, and forever. So, when I speak of the church this morning I am not only speaking of Faith EPC, but of all Christian communities where believers come together in the name of Jesus Christ. Where you find God's people, you find His church.

2. WHAT ARE THE DESIRES JESUS HAS FOR THE CHURCH?

Now let's go to John 17, as Jesus shares His desires for the church, beginning in verse 20:

20 My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,

Jesus now transitions from praying for His disciples in the preceding verses, to praying for all believers that were and are still to come.

21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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.

Here we discover part of our answer to question 2, “**What are the desires Jesus has for the church?**” Jesus...desires...unity. Verse 21 opens with Jesus' petition to God that all Christians will be united. This desired unity of the Body of Christ – that is the call for oneness from those of us who make up the church – is a common theme throughout Scripture. No matter how we (or society) classify us in the flesh, be it nationality, socio-economic status, even denominational preference, we are all one in the same Jesus, if He is our Lord.

1 Corinthians 12:13:

13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

But what does unity look like? The Christian's template for unity with fellow believers is the relationship shared by the Triune Godhead: Father, Son, and Spirit. God is always in loving relationship to Himself.

When I read that high standard, my initial reaction is one of human rationality, as I inquire of God, “C’mon...you’ve got to be kidding me! I have to get along with ‘that guy’ – a Christian brother who drives me crazy, who I believe was sent to torture me – and love him in a manner that exemplifies God’s relationship to Jesus?”

Of course I already know the answer to that. And you do, too. ..Yes, we are called to actually love “that guy” no matter how many of your buttons he seems to thrive on pushing.

For all of us dealing with brothers and sisters we do not gel with – maybe even butt heads with – Jesus tells us to be “one” with them, just as He is one with His Father.

The good Lord never said it was going to be easy:

46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? – Matthew 5, verses 46-47

In this passage taken from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, He is actually referring to the call for all Christians to love our enemies. But if we can’t even love our Christian brothers and sisters, how are we to love those who aren’t even part of God’s spiritual family. For it is Christ rooted in the individual believer that in turn holds each of us together in community.

Jesus’ primary objective on earth was to do His Father’s will, and God performed His divine works through His Son.

In a short clip we viewed yesterday at the Truth Project simulcast, R. C. Sproul has these words to offer concerning the mystery that is the relationship of the Triune Godhead: “God in His being is both unity and diversity.”

This sort of oneness exemplified by the God-head, where each individual is fully of one mind, one body, and one spirit with other believers, is what we as Christians are called to. We were created for community. This unified and diverse body is Christ’s church, and speaks to the type of unity expected of us.

For one, this type of unity does not mean that we are all to be conformists. That is to say that we all become alike. James Boice speaks of church unity like this: “...the church is to have a spiritual unity involving the basic orientation, desires, and will of those participating.”

The church is likened to a physical body in Scripture. Each individual has a crucial role in the functionality of the Body. Christ is the Head. You may be an arm. Another a finger, a toe, an elbow, and so on.

Unfortunately, someone always ends up filling the role of armpit. *Hey...somebody’s got to do it.* All joking aside, just as the physical body needs the armpit, so we all need each other despite our brokenness and deficiencies.

4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are different kinds of services, but the same Lord.. 6 There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. – 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

We need to celebrate our diversity and encourage one another in our giftedness. It would look awfully weird if we were all just a bunch of thumbs. We'd be "thumb guy." That's just frightening. For more on various roles in the Body of Christ and the gifts the Spirit imparts, see Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

Returning to the second part of verse 21:

May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Christian unity is an impossible feat...without the power of God working through us. It is our spiritual oneness in Christ that God will use to lead unbelievers to Himself.

Verse 22:

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

The glory Jesus speaks of here, first given to Him by His Father and now to all Christians, I believe is most likely the glory of His crucifixion just days away. Jesus opens the prayer in John 17 as such:

I After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you."

I believe this glory is the gift of His Spirit in us and eternal life, which comes only through the redemption of our souls by Jesus' work on the Cross. Jesus says we share in this glory, and this glory is to bring unity to the church. The Lord again says that we are to pattern the Body of Christ after His relationship to God. This is already the second time in this short passage of Scripture where Jesus expresses that Christian oneness is to mirror His relationship to His Father. When Jesus intentionally repeats Himself, I can't help but think He has the thick-headed listener – as in myself – in mind. Jesus didn't need to pray aloud for His Father to hear Him or act. For they are one. Jesus prayed aloud for the benefit of His listeners.

You don't have to take my word for it. Listen to the words of Jesus recorded in John 11, verses 41-42 as He prays to His Father for the resurrection of Lazarus:

Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.

When the Lord repeats Himself, as He does multiple times in Scripture, it's for our benefit. If you're taking notes, maybe you should copy it over again – at least an underline – no less than a star.

Returning now to verse 22:

I in them and you in me

The union of God to Son is linked to the union of Jesus in us by way of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 23:

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

In verse 21 we noted that God's desire for His church was to be united. The Lord's purpose in the unity of believers is twofold as outlined in verse 23: First, that our unity will bear witness and validate Jesus' ministry, and second, that our unity will manifest the same deep, unconditional love that God lavishes on us, and upon His one and only Son.

There are a plethora of programs, tools, seminars, books, and specialists that are completely devoted to teaching the Christian how to evangelize. That's a good thing. I'm all about equipping God's people to share their faith. But what a picture the Lord paints here: Our unity alone is a witness to the world. If we can just pull ourselves together, Jesus says by that alone the world will know that He is the Son of God.

Verse 24:

24 Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

Another of Jesus' desires was that all Christians will commune and fellowship with Him in eternity, as His glory is displayed in its fullness. In simpler terms, Jesus wishes His people to share in His glory. Simply incredible. I often marvel at just the thought of getting a glimpse of this Divine glory. But we will be consumed in all its fullness when we go to be with Christ! *Amen?*

Jesus affirms His Lordship in verse 24 by reminding us that He and the Father have been one since before the beginning of time. We also know that Jesus' prayer for believers to join Him in heaven will indeed come to pass. It is not merely a request. For Jesus' actions are always catalyzed by God's will:

38 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of Him who sent me.
- John 6:38

Look with me at verses 25-26:

25 Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. 26 I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.

Here Jesus authenticates the righteousness of God. We note the contrast between a holy, just and righteous God, before an unbelieving world.

The Christians know God, for Jesus has revealed God to them by way of Himself. This was purposed so that we may possess and grow in an unparalleled love with one another, modeled after God's loving relationship to Jesus, and only available to those in whom Christ resides.

Friends, as part of Christ's church I have to ask you, "Where's the unity? Where's the love? Where's the witness?"

Which brings us to question 3:

3. WHAT'S THE STATUS OF THE CHURCH?

Where do we fall in light of Christ's expectations for us? I'd give us a "not so great" rating. This is even more apparent when taking Jesus' words and longing for unity among believers into consideration. The church has fallen way short of His standard.

As we just read in Jesus' prayer, He calls all Christians – who comprise His spiritual family – to live out their time on earth in a unified, loving relationship with one another that transcends fleshly boundaries, yearnings, and limitations.

Yet, as we look back at the past 2,000 years of church history, it's obvious to both the Christian and the unbelieving world, that the church has failed terribly in heeding the words of Jesus Christ.

One writer has said this:

Considering all the divisions that have plagued Christendom for two thousand years, it is amazing that God has continued to use the church to extend his kingdom.

What I find even more astounding is that Christ – God in human flesh – knew that spiritual battles and divisions were imminent in the church's future, still He set a standard of relational harmony among His followers. Still, Jesus graciously uses a people often plagued by broken fellowship to share His love and the Good News of salvation with the world.

You don't hear the expression *dog-eat-dog world* so much today. Nevertheless, the mentality that success is attained by the strongest and most powerful still exists. For those in the job world that don't make the cut, whether it be due to laziness, lack of education, not meeting company goals, fraud – whatever – they are frequently not given a second chance at success.

No matter how successful or unsuccessful you are in the secular world, we all fall short of God's holy and perfect standard. Our disharmonious relationships with our brothers and sisters are just one more piece of evidence.

Yet, God...uses...us. When we fall down and rip into a family member...when we go crashing to the floor because we back-stabbed a fellow co-worker...when we take advantage of someone because of our position of authority...God gives us another chance. We are to repent – to pick ourselves up off the floor and do His will – until we fall again...and again...and again...and the cycle continues.

God's standard is perfection. Yet we break His heart to no end, and He forgives us every time. Do you extend that same love and grace to the Christians God has strategically placed in your life?

Now for our final question today.

4. WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

Every single one of us is commanded to take an active part in establishing unity where division runs rampant in the fellowship of believers.

As we have seen through and through in this text, as well as throughout God's Word, we are commanded to commune with our brothers and sisters. This is how others are to know Christ is in us.

As dysfunctional as we may be, God has called all of His children to fellowship with other believers. We are also called to evangelize, to disciple others, to serve, to fellowship with other believers and to worship the Lord as we are reminded in the *Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren. Although at times you will have opportunities to carry out the will of God in your life by yourself, these five ministry purposes as outlined in the *Purpose-Driven Life* are intended to be carried out in community.

As I mentioned earlier, we were created for community – a unified community of God's children brought and held together by the Lord Himself.

I believe there is a lack of unity because we are a self-absorbed people. If we are not unified, it is because we have gotten in the way of God's will. We may say we want what He wants, but our actions, our priorities, our lifestyles, our consideration for others – or lack thereof – are intrinsically contrary in nature.

We may say we want what God wants, as long as it doesn't require more than we are willing to give. We live in a time where consumerism is at its pinnacle. We can get anything we want. Speaking of community, if we don't find what we're looking for in one church we can just hop the fence and go to the next one.

We may be discontent with one church because they are lacking in a ministry we desire. A ministry we feel is vital to our or our family's well-being. Maybe we prefer a different style of preaching or worship. Maybe someone simply rubbed you the wrong way. Maybe there's a desire for a church big enough where you can just slide in and out through the side door without being noticed. Maybe there just aren't enough hours in the day to make time, to be with and to serve alongside God's people.

So instead of heeding the words of Christ and accepting the imperfections of others as He has called us to, some individuals simply avoid the exact type of community Jesus created them for.

If we truly wanted what the heart of God longs for, our lives would be more about what we can offer the Body of Christ, as opposed to what we are getting out of all this.

I think it's wonderful that churches are broadcasting their services all over the world! If you're in China, constantly evading persecution for your faith in Jesus, and your only opportunity for Sunday morning worship comes through webcast...I can understand that.

But for those of us here in the land of the free, we have little excuse for skipping out on church, for missing out on the opportunity to build unity with others. Opportunities to hold worship Sunday morning in the comfort of one's home – pj's and all – has unfortunately become a substitute for being physically present at a church facility for all too many. I'm speaking of those for whom this has become ritualistic.

Hebrews 10:24-25, also comes to mind:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another...

Yes, I know it's tempting to sleep in on Sundays. And yes, I know God still loves you when you opt out of Sunday morning worship with the rest of us and instead watch some other people do church in some other state as you sing praise songs with the family dog.

And yes, it can also be easier to side-step the call of Jesus to be united by just not uniting with anyone at all. But I think you and I both know He wants you here.

And yes, I know Christians are flawed and it can be a draining experience working through this unity thing at times.

All excuses aside, Jesus wants you here. Or if not here, find another imperfect church somewhere else – because we all are imperfect – and get some community! You were created to be in deep Christ-centered relationships with other believers.

A.W.Tozer wrote:

...in our human bodies each member is nourished by the same blood which at once gives life and unity to the entire organism, so in the Body of Christ the quickening Spirit flowing through every part gives life and unity to the whole...The Church is one, whether waking or sleeping, by a unity of life forevermore.

Now we come to your challenge today: What will you do? What will your part be in the name of Christ-driven unity?

I'm sure some of you, as I admittedly have done before, began devising an intangible list in your head of all the "armpit Christians" you know that need to change.

Friends, this list is useless, for you are responsible for working on *you*. You cannot change the church...at least by yourself, especially if you're looking to change others first. But as a unified effort, as each of us begins to repent of his or her sins which allow or even impose divisions, the church will begin to look more and more like the place of love and harmony that Jesus Christ longs for it to be.

There are many options for the Christian desiring to do his or her part in the name of spiritual harmony. It might be putting malicious or hurtful acts another has done towards you, behind you – never an easy feat, but possible with God. It may be restructuring your schedule and starting up a small group here in this church, or simply joining one already in place. It might mean taking baby steps at first and hanging out for a bit after church and making some new friends in the Fellowship Hall. Maybe you will settle on plans to take things deeper with currently shallow relationships, inviting people to get to know the real you.

Working towards unity might even mean confronting someone in brotherly love if he or she has become divisive. This is not to be confused with you attempting to change them, but only opening their eyes to how their actions are working against the church's greater good. If you feel the Lord places this burden on your heart, check your heart and motives first. Reproof of another out of love is often necessary, but never easy and always painful at the time for both parties.

Whatever you do, allow Jesus to be your compass, as the journey of life is never-ending and requires a wisdom and strength beyond that of our simple human capacities.

The unity of the church was the focus of Jesus' prayer in the final hours before His crucifixion. It is His utmost concern. How then, can it not be ours?

As usual, I would like to close with the words of someone much wiser than I. Please turn in your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 2, verses 17-22, or simply let the words of Paul sink in as you listen:

17 He [Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. 19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Amen.