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 Oxford Circle Mennonite Church
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 Sermon Series: "Good News Bears"

The Jesus Dance

Today we're beginning a new sermon series that focuses on the church: what is the church, what is its mission? We call it "Good News Bears"—the opposite of "bad news bears"—meaning that the mission of the church is to be the bearer of the gospel, which means "good news." In this series we're going to be looking at what that good news is and how the church bears it.

In my sermon today I'll be focusing on the relationship between Jesus and the church, based on his prayer in John 17.

Before we read it I'd like to make a couple of comments about this prayer. From the gospels we know that Jesus had what one could call an excellent prayer life. We read in various places that Jesus often went off to be alone to pray. He had the kind of connection with his Heavenly Father that gave him absolute assurance that he was obeying his will. I think we'd all like to have that kind of connection, that kind of prayer life. When I was about fifteen I experienced a renewed love for God and a renewed zeal to obey him. At one point I decided I was going to get up at 5:30 every morning to pray. Well, you can guess how long that lasted. I think my intentions were right, but I overshot it a bit. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak.

But Jesus had that kind of vital connection with God that I think we'd all like to have. Most of the time we don't know what Jesus prayed. My point about this prayer is that this is not an example of what Jesus' prayer life is like. It certainly is talking with God, asking him and communicating with him. But it's even more than this. Jesus prays this prayer in full hearing of his disciples, right after a long session in which he was teaching them. This prayer is part of that lesson.

So as we read it, let's look for what it is that Jesus is trying to teach his followers through this prayer.

John 17:20-26 ²⁰ "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

As we're looking for what Jesus is trying to teach us through this prayer, I'd like to draw our attention to three key phrases. Each of these phrases has the term "so that" in the NRSV, which I'm using. The NIV just says "that," but I like the stronger emphasis that "so that" gives. It means that there's a goal, there's something that Jesus deeply desires for his followers.

The first “so that” that I want to look at is in verse 22. Jesus prays, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, *so that* they may be one, as we are one.” I want to not that Jesus began his prayer by praying for himself. Then he prayed for his disciples who were actually with him at the time. But then, in the passage that we read, he prays for all his disciples, even the ones in the future. So Jesus is praying for *us*, and Jesus is teaching us.

And one of Jesus’ deepest desires for his followers is that we be one. What does that mean, to be one? First let’s think about what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean that we’re all the same. The church is sometimes called the body of Christ, which the Apostle Paul says is composed of many members. We all have unique gifts to offer, because we are all different. So being one does not mean that we’re all the same.

Being one doesn’t mean that we share all the same perspectives and opinions either. We can’t expect any human community, church or not, to think the same at all times. So what does being one mean? We can get a clue from what Jesus says twice, on either side of this call for unity. To be one means to be together in carrying out God’s mission in the world. Jesus’ desire for us is that nothing come between us that hinders our ability to preach the gospel and to show compassion.

Are we one in the way that God wants us to be? One important thing for us here at Oxford Circle is discerning what God is doing right here in this neighborhood. And God has led us in various ways to step out in faith and purchase a new space, and to give in whatever ways we can. When we know that we’re a part of what God is doing, something bigger than ourselves, then we can be one as Jesus prayed. God is at work, and God has a mission for us to the world.

This brings us to the second key “so that” phrase. In verse 23, Jesus prays, “That they may become completely one, *so that* the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” *So that* the world may know.

It might be helpful to clarify what “the world” means here. Earlier in the prayer Jesus made it clear that his followers and the world are two different things. He says that they are *in* the world, but they are not *of* the world, in the same way that Jesus himself was *in* the world but not *of* the world.

I went to a conservative Mennonite school in Lancaster County for junior high. My classmates and I would have frequent lively discussions about everything from Christian rock music to mowing the lawn on Sunday. I remember one particular discussion with one of my more opinionated classmates on the subject of men going without shirts outside. For the sake of discussion, I laid out a variety of reasons that a man might not wear a shirt: it’s hot, he’s working hard, he has a vitamin E deficiency, you know, the usual arguments. “Well,” she said, with an air of finality, “It’s worldly.” And that, for her, won the argument. As I found out, that was her trump card for every argument we had.

While I can’t say that I agree with many of her conclusions, especially on Christian rock, I do think that at its core her point is true. I’m not talking about all the things that she or her church community might be against. I’m saying that they’re right that we can expect different behavior, different lifestyles, different values, from the world than we can from the followers of Jesus.

Jesus prays that we will be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. This is because the world does not yet know Jesus as Savior and Lord. But this is where the good news breaks in with force: God has not given up on us *or* the world. God has given us a mission, to be the bearers of this amazing message that God loved the world enough to come in the flesh and to redeem

us from sin. “That they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

And behind it all we have hope, that whether here or in the life to come, we will always be with Jesus. He prays, “Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (v. 24). Christ had no beginning, and he will have no end – and we have the promise of eternity with him.

So Jesus’ desire for us, his followers, is *that we be one* and *that we join God’s mission in the world*. And the third key “so that” phrase is in v. 26: “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, *so that* the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

God’s love in us is the prayer of Jesus. At its core, Jesus’ prayer is about relationships: Jesus’ relationship with the Father and with his followers, the Father’s relationship with the world, the believers’ relationship with the world, with one another, and with Jesus. In the end, the whole thing is a huge web that God wants to transform into right relationships.

This prayer is so packed full of pronouns that it’s about to burst. From the perspective of Jesus: We’ve got “You-Father”, we’ve got “I – the Son,” we’ve got “they- my followers.” And then there’s “the world,” which does not yet believe in Jesus.

To get the full impact of the prayer, let’s read it one more time. Look at how the whole thing is focused on all of the relationships that God is making right in Jesus Christ.

To conclude: Jesus’ desire and prayer for us, his followers, is *that we be one* and *that we join God’s mission in the world*, to be “good news bears” in a world full of bad news. And that the love of God may be in us and among us as God is making right all of these relationships. Praise God!

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can come to you as Jesus did, with our thanks and our praise and our requests. Help us to be more like Christ as we live in the world. Help us to be one, to be united as missionaries of your good news. And we pray that your love would be in us and among us, so that the world will know that you have come to us in the person of Jesus. We thank you for this amazing good news, and the mission you have given us to share it and to show it. Now be with us as we depart from here – may we keep in step with your Spirit. We pray this all in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.