

HARDER THAN THE WORLD SERIES

John 17:20-26

Laurie and I have been taking care of Doc and Banjo, Toby and Anna's dynamic canine duo. We owned a dog for 16 years so we are used to the pandemonium that ensues when you pick up a leash or even mention the word “walk.” Humans who have just won the lottery react with less excitement than those two show when they get a hint that a walk is about to happen.

The walk ritual is greatly complicated by the fact that there are two dogs we must deal with. This is a problem because Doc and Banjo are not always on the same page when it comes to direction. When one wants to go quickly forward the other discovers a scent emanating from some post or plant off the sidewalk that he absolutely must thoroughly investigate. So one moves straight ahead while the other wants to stop and move off to the side. Laurie and I adapt to this and maneuver ourselves and their leashes to adjust for it, but just as we think we've got everything straightened out the sniffing dog will decide he has smelled all he needs to and will dart ahead and the leading dog will suddenly dart off to the side to check out another new scent. In the process they seem to be expert and getting our leashes totally tangled. Just trying to get them to walk forward together is a constant and often futile challenge. There is a glorious stretch where we are on our way home, they are tired and thirsty and there aren't a lot of interesting spots to investigate that they walk side by side straight ahead. It's wonderful, but it is very temporary.

Now imagine that instead of dealing with just the two of them we were trying to walk 100 or 150 dogs or even more! Can you imagine how chaotic that would be? Imagine all the darting, barking, maneuvering and tangling that would go on. What a nightmare. Do you know who is even worse than dogs? Human beings. So how do you suppose it will go if you try to get say 150 humans to walk in the same direction? Does the expression “herding dogs” mean anything to you? Oh, wait, that's "herding cats" isn't it? Well you get the point. As hard as herding cats or dogs may be, herding humans is worse.

The task seems impossible. Yet Jesus said something in his prayer the night before he was arrested that speaks to this very matter and says something astounding. What he says actually addresses a desire that is deeply imbedded in the human soul, though it appears to be a desire that is doomed to eternally go unfulfilled. Jesus said otherwise. Let's look at what he said in John 17:20-26.

JESUS PRAYED FOR UNITY AMONG HIS PEOPLE

Yesterday after the Anchorman breakfast Laurie came downstairs and said, “I've been watching the movie *Miracle*.” It is about the 1980 US Olympic hockey team that pulled off a miracle and won the gold medal when it seemed totally impossible. She had just watched the scene in which Coach Herb Brooks gave his speech to the team before the game with the seemingly unbeatable Soviet hockey team. “Great moments are born from

great opportunity... That's what you have here tonight. One game. If we played them 10 times they might win nine. But not this game. Not tonight. Tonight we are the greatest hockey team in the world. You were meant to be here tonight. This is your time." We're familiar with scenes in movies where the coach gives the team that fiery speech or the commander gives his last talk to the troops before they go out to battle. The speech is final instruction, reminder and inspiration. John 13-17 is Jesus' pregame speech. In John 17 he has now given those last instructions and motivation and he is praying his last public prayer.

Jesus wanted his men to know what he was asking the Father on their behalf when he prayed this long prayer. In the prayer he made three requests on behalf of the disciples. We saw the first two requests last week. The first was in verse 11. He prayed that the Father would "protect them by the power of your name." He said it again in verse 15. "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." The second request was that the Father would "sanctify" his disciples, meaning set them apart for their special calling and mission.

His third request for all of us who believe in him was in verse 21. He prayed "that all of them may be one." He had already mentioned this in verse 11 and he says it again in verse 23. He asked we "be brought to complete unity." He wanted us to be totally unified. How important was this to Jesus? Obviously since it was the very last thing he prayed for his followers, his final intercession on our behalf, it must have mattered a lot to him. The guys who were there when he prayed this never forgot it. Some 50 years later John remembered it.

I have to confess that I am somewhat frustrated because I feel utterly unable to express how important this is. Words, at least my words, fail to impress on my hearers how absolutely critical this is to anyone who cares about what God wants. I know that because I have seen so many people listen to me expound on this topic, nod in agreement, and then act in a way that is so contrary to it that it is as though they've never heard it. Time and time again I see brothers and sisters in Christ who seem to think there are other things that matter a lot more.

However, I will stress again that unity is hugely important to the Lord. This is not the only place in the Bible where you find a heavy emphasis on the need for unity. Consider Ephesians 4:1. "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." What calling have we received? Paul had just spent the first three chapters of Ephesus discussing it. In Ephesians 2:12-13 Paul wrote, "remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." In Romans 1:7 Paul said God has called us to be his holy people. In 1

Peter 2:9 Peter said God has called us out of darkness into his kingdom of light to be his holy people. You'll see the same message in 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 1 Thessalonians 2:12.

God has called us from before the world was created to be his people, to be in his kingdom of light. It took the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus to accomplish this, but God has given us the gift of being his adopted children who will live forever in his kingdom. It is a gift. We have not earned it. In his grace and mercy he gave it to us when we had no hope of ever deserving it. How could you ever calculate the value of that gift? There is no measure in human terms of how great and how precious this calling into his kingdom is. It has eternal and infinite value as shown by the fact that it came to us at infinite cost to the Father.

Now consider the astounding command we are given in Ephesians 4:1. You have this incalculably precious calling. In light of this Paul says, "Live a life worthy of the calling." The idea behind the Greek word translated "worthy" there was something of equal weight or of equal value. Paul is saying "live a life that is of equal value to your calling." But how is that possible? We've just said that the calling we've received is immeasurably valuable. What could we ever do that will amount to such a value? Imagine if somehow it was determined that you were responsible for our nation's \$17 trillion debt and were required to pay it off by the end of the year. That would be a totally impossible. But understand paying off that unfathomable sum of money would be a more manageable task than living a life of equal value to the gift that God has given to us through Jesus Christ. That's a hopeless task.

But God has his own unique way of determining what is of equal weight to the calling we have been given. He commanded this because there is a way we can live that in his mind balances the scales. In Ephesians 4:2-3 he says, "Be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." So the life he thinks is worthy of our calling is one that is humble and patient with others so that we can live in unity! He didn't say that what was equal in value to our calling is leading thousands of people to faith in Christ. It's not having enough faith to do miracles that will astound thousands of people. It's not being more committed in the faith than anyone ever in history. It's not being holier than most would think possible. It is preserving unity!

The church at Corinth was a group that had a lot of the more visible and dramatic spiritual gifts. Speaking in tongues was rife in the church. But Paul told them they were a bunch of spiritual infants. They were not mature people walking in the Spirit of Christ. But they actually did miracles! There were miraculous healings and some prophecy happening there. Yet they were grossly immature in their faith and needed to grow up. How did Paul know that? He said to them, "I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ." In verse 3 he wrote, "You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?" The thing that gave

them away and revealed them to be not spiritual giants but midgets was they couldn't get along. Once again we see that God says our unity is of enormous importance. It was what Jesus prayed for us, it is what is worthy of our calling, and it is the invariable and inevitable result of spiritual maturity.

Why did Jesus make such a big deal of unity?

JESUS GAVE REASONS FOR THE IMPORTANCE OF UNITY

In his prayer Jesus revealed two reasons why he was so concerned about his followers being unified. The first is that unity is a part of God's character. At the end of verse 21 Jesus asked of the Father that his followers might be one "just as you are in me and I am in you." The unity of believers depicts the unity that exists within the character of God.

God exists in this really mystical way. He is one being, but has three persons. I have no idea how that can be, but that is what the New Testament tells us. That means that somehow God has relationships within his own being. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate to each other and do so in perfect harmony and unity. You see this idea again in verse 26 where Jesus prayed that "the love you have for me may be in them." The Father had perfect love for the Son and vice versa. This makes sense. We know that God is love. Love is the motive for everything he thinks, says and does. It rules how he relates to everyone and everything in his creation. It also rules relations within his own being. Love always produces real unity and oneness.

We saw last week in John 17:6-19 that all of us who follow Jesus are called to the mission of revealing the Father. This is the goal, the very purpose of our existence. We are to display for others what God is like. We are to openly say to the world, "Look at us and you'll know what God is like." We will not do that perfectly, but we should live in such a way that people get some sense of what God really is like just from watching us. Sadly when we cannot get along with each other, when we are divided and fighting with each other we say something awful about God, something that is absolutely not true. We say that God cannot even get along with himself.

When the disciples argue among themselves about who is the most important they are telling the world this is how God is. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are bickering over which one of them should be the top dog. Who should be the one who gets the praise? Who gets credit for creating places like Hawaii and who gets the blame for creating Bakersfield? Who has to do the dirty job of going into the world and living like a human being in order to effect a rescue for people? Would you say that picture honors God? Obviously that is horribly wrong and it is denigrating to the character of God. But that's precisely the kind of thing we are saying when we cannot live in unity and love.

The second reason Jesus said unity is so important can be seen in verse 21 and again in verse 23. In verse 21 Jesus asked that we would be one "so that the world may believe

that you have sent me.” In verse 23 he asked for “complete unity to let the world know that you sent me.” What would prove that Jesus was truly divine, that he was sent by the Father? It was the unity of his followers.

There are voices in the church that tell us what we need to do to convince people that Jesus was, as he claimed, truly God in human form. What would you say would accomplish that? Some suggest what Christians call apologetics. We need arguments for the faith. We need evidence, logic, powerful reasoning that will demonstrate the truth of the faith. Others say we need demonstrations of spiritual power. We need signs and wonders. We need miracles that will show that God is with us and will convince people. Some say we need great church programs, or great works of service in the world. It is good to have reasons to believe. Programs and service are fine. Spiritual power is good if it is real. But according to Jesus none of these will convince people that Jesus is Lord! What will convince the world the Jesus is Lord is that we are unified!

How can that be? We saw last week that we have a deep and desperate need to belong. We have a desire to live in unity with other people. In fact, we were made for it. We read books or see movies that feature a group of people totally committed to each other, bonded together so tightly that nothing can break the bond, and something within in us wants that. We want to be part of it. It might be the fellowship of the ring, or the band of brothers or the innumerable movies about some women who are lifelong friends, but we lament that we don't have it. Perhaps it is a marriage that is so rich and beautiful that we long for it. The point is we want to be a part of real unity. We all feel it.

But this is where things go sideways. We can't seem to do it! In fact, what Jesus was saying here is that unity is a human impossibility. Have you ever seen either the Broadway play or the movie *Camelot*? Its story was derived from the 15th century classic *Les Morte D'Arthur* by Thomas Mallory. You know the basics. Arthur is king of England and has a dream. He creates the Round Table. It is a place where the knights will be equals. It is a solution to the rivalry, competition, bickering and war among them. No maneuvering and plotting to gain ascendancy because all are equal. It is beautiful and for a while indeed the dream comes to life. There is peace and unity. But what happens? Lancelot comes along and with his pride and self-righteousness engenders jealousy among the others. Then human nature really hits. Arthur has an illegitimate son, Mordred, who shows up. In his bitterness toward his father he begins sowing seeds of dissent. Then Lancelot and Guinevere, Arthur's wife, have an affair, and in the end the whole thing blows up and ends in civil war. It is a statement that humans might create peace and unity for a brief time, but inevitably human nature will rear its head and it will obliterate the unity. It has always happened and always will.

Did you watch the opening ceremonies of the winter Olympics when they were on television in February? I didn't. I never watch those ceremonies. One reason is to me they seem so phony. Oh isn't it beautiful that all these nations come together in peace? Isn't

this a beautiful moment? No, it's not. As soon as the games start all that oneness and peace will evaporate like steam. Those "unified" people will be fighting each other tooth and nail, they'll be maneuvering for some advantage, they'll be trying to work deals with officials, they'll be deeply divided by rivalries. The supposed unity of the opening ceremonies will be noticeably absent.

That's the human race. It started in Eden when Adam and Eve messed up. Their rebellion instantly introduced conflict and division into their previously idyllic relationship. The next generation of humans featured a man killing his own brother. It's been like that ever since. That's humanity. That's why unity is simply not found on earth. Unity is unnatural for humans. It is so far beyond human ability that if it were to exist it would be a miracle. We know that unity, if it is real, is clearly a divine work. It speaks to the human heart in a way that goes beyond even the mind's objections. It is evidence of God's work because humans want it badly but simply cannot produce it.

You can have the most dynamic arguments for Christianity, the most persuasive demonstrations of the truth of Jesus that are possible. You can wield them with non-believers and find them ineffective because they can look at Christians and see them quarreling and divided and they know in their hearts that this isn't true. On the other side of that coin the reverse is also true. Maybe you don't have all the answers. Maybe you don't have the most powerful arguments down pat. But if you are part of a group of followers of Jesus that has true unity and community it will be more persuasive than anything you could ever say. People long for community and unity. They were made for it and they can't find it in this world. If they find it in a group they will be drawn by it almost against their will. Jesus said this is the most powerful argument for his divinity, that his followers would be one.

APPLICATION

Leslie Flynn years ago wrote a book he titled *Great Church Fights*. In the book he told of a friend whose kids were out in the back yard with playmates when he became aware that the noise level was getting awfully high. The kids were arguing and whatever the cause of the argument the volume was getting pretty intense. He went out to the yard and with some concern said, "What's going on here?" His kids said, "It's okay, Dad. We're just playing church."

At times I have been accused of being something of an Eeyore, a pessimist that thinks it is absurd to see any glass as half full, that thinks even the full glass is certain to be knocked over and emptied soon. But I deny that. I have proof that in fact I am a total and unrepentant optimist. That proof is that after 35 years as a pastor I continue to preach about unity as though it could actually happen.

When I review my experience over the past 35 years I have to say there's not much there that would make me think that unity is even a remote possibility. Over the years I've seen fellow staff members have problems and undercut each other, I've seen people go to war as they fight over control of ministries, I've seen Christian friendships blow up over hurt feelings, people get upset and leave their church over some of the most trivial of matters. You'd have to do some pretty fancy mental gymnastics to enable yourself to think of that as unity. Continuing to think that unity is possible in the church is a bit like believing the San Diego Padres are going to win the World Series this year. It's only possible if you don't actually watch how they play. And it would seem that thinking that unity among Christians is only possible if you don't actually watch how they live.

Though there is nothing I can do about the church worldwide I continue to hope, to pray and to do all I can to work for unity in this church. We don't control other people, but we can control ourselves. It is clear that this task is much harder than winning the World Series, for the obstacles to unity are much greater. How many people does it take to fracture unity? It only takes one. One person focused on the wrong things will rupture unity. So what must we do to pursue unity in this church?

PRAY

Jesus thought that our having unity was a big deal and so he made it a matter of prayer. It seems like a good idea to follow his example. If he thought praying could help then maybe that's where we should start as well.

Jesus did not assume unity would happen naturally. He knew very well the character of human nature. The unfortunate reality is that ever since Adam and Eve made their fatal decision, human nature is turned in on itself. It is literally obsessed with self. If you put two people who are obsessed with self in a room, what is going to happen? Somehow they will find a way to be at odds. Conflict and division are inevitable. The point is that being divided and at war is the natural state of the human race. If we just do what comes naturally there will be no unity. This means we must ask God to work. We are, in effect, asking for a miracle.

LIVE IN THE SPIRIT

In Ephesians 4:3 Paul exhorted Christians to "keep the unity of the Spirit." So where does unity come from? It doesn't come from the fact that we have the same race, the same culture, the same language, the same interests or any human thing. It comes from the Spirit of Christ. He is the one who produces unity.

Tim Keese, founder of Frontline Ministries International, travels the world to connect with Christians and learn what is going on in many diverse locales. He has been to some of the most dangerous and most closed places on the planet. He has met all kinds of Christians of every tribal, national, racial and cultural stripe. In his book, *Dispatches From The Front*, here is what he says, "I have seen empires come and go, but never have

I seen anything so radical and pervasive as the gospel of the kingdom. The kingdom of Christ is diverse yet unified... We are like (Christ's) family, his body... The more I grasped the gospel, the more I loved Christ, and the more I loved him the more I loved his people. I found a certain likeness in them." He found they all have something in them that he connected with. That likeness is the Spirit of Jesus in us all.

A number of years ago we were on a vacation in Honolulu with our then single children. We had dinner at Cheeseburger in Paradise then watched some fireworks from the beach. We had noticed earlier in the day some people setting up for a surfing contest that was going to happen the next day on that beach. After the fireworks we began to walk toward our hotel but we noticed a group of men who had been setting up for the surf contest. There was a group of 10 or 12 all standing in a circle. It was obvious that they were praying. We waited until they were done then we walked over to them and asked if they were Christians. They said they were, that the contest the next day was sponsored by a Christian surfing organization of which they were members. The cool thing was that in that group there were several native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, there were a couple of African Americans and there were several Caucasians. When we introduced ourselves to them they warmly welcomed us even though they'd never met us before. There was an immediate connection and a sense of oneness with them. Skin color, race, culture, status, common interests didn't matter. We were brothers in Christ, and that was all that mattered. There was a sense of the unity that comes from the Spirit of Jesus in us. That's what made us one.

After we had talked with those brothers for a bit we bid them goodbye and resumed our walk to our hotel. We only went a block or so when we encountered a group of college age kids sitting on the grass next to the beach. A couple of them had guitars and they were all singing. They were singing a very familiar worship song. We stopped to listen and a couple of those young people came over to talk to us. Once again, though we had never met them there was an instant connection. Ethnicity didn't matter, class didn't matter, age didn't matter, all that mattered was that we were brothers and sisters in Christ, and in him we were one.

So if we are going to have unity we are going to have to start with the Spirit of Christ living in us. That must be the thing that ties us together. It is not that we agree on everything, that we have lots in common, that we really like these people. It is that the Spirit of Jesus is in us all. That Spirit is a Spirit of grace, love and forgiveness. The Spirit of Jesus is not a spirit that looks to criticize and cut other people down, that is always anxious to find fault. He is a Spirit that covers over the sins of others, meaning not that he doesn't see them, but that he forgives them. And as we walk in that Spirit that is what will rule our relationships with others.

MAKE THE EFFORT

Ephesians 4:3 says “make every effort” to preserve unity. Other translations say things like “be diligent” or “be anxious” to preserve unity. In *The Message* Eugene Peterson paraphrased it “pour yourselves out” to preserve unity. The RMPV (the Rick Myatt Perverse Version) renders it simply “Try hard!”

My freshman year in college I was trying to make the baseball team. I had played infield all my life, but there were guys who were better than me at every position in the infield so the coaches thought they should try me in the outfield. My first day in the outfield we were working on communication. In this case the idea was a coach would hit a ball over our heads that we had to go back to try to catch. Major League ball parks have a warning track near the fence so an outfielder can feel when he goes from grass to dirt. That tells him he is near the fence. Our field didn't have that. In fact it had a grassy bank in left field and the fence was on top of the bank. So the idea was the guy in left field would go back watching the ball and the center fielder would yell to him telling him how close he was to the bank. My turn came. The coach hit the ball and I went after it with reckless abandon. The oddest thing happened. I was told afterward that the guy in center was yelling to me the whole time. I never heard a thing. It's amazing what your brain screens out at times. I can recall to this day absolute silence as I tracked that ball. I hit that bank going full speed. It was a really unpleasant surprise. Amazingly I caught the ball. However, I clearly wasn't getting the hang of how that communication was supposed to work. That was my last day in the outfield. I was back in the infield as a second stringer the next day. But my story doesn't end there. I've told the story before that a few weeks later I was playing third base in the eighth inning of a game we were losing 12-0 (that's why I got to play). The opposing batter hit a pop fly down the third base line and I took off after it. I knew that you're supposed to quickly glance down to see how close you're getting to the fence that surrounds the field then look back up to the ball. I did that and knew I had room. What I didn't notice was that on this field (it was an away game) the bull pen was down that line and I was heading right for the bull pen mound. I hit it going full speed. It was the baseball equivalent of blowing a tire at 70 miles per hour on the freeway. That play produced some interesting results, but one of them was our coach said to me, “Myatt, once thing I have to say for you is you certainly do try hard.” I gave it my all. God wants us to give our all to keep unity.

Remember that unity is not natural for us. If we just do what comes naturally the result will be division. Dissension requires no effort. It will just happen automatically. If we are going to avoid division and dissension it will require effort. That was Paul's point. We will have to deliberately choose and work to preserve unity. That's what Paul meant.

A big part of this involves making the choice to let Jesus be Lord. In John 16:14 Jesus said of the Holy Spirit “he will glorify me.” The Spirit is all about glorifying Jesus. If we are living by the Spirit that's what we will be about. We will remember at all times that our mission, our purpose in life, is to reveal the character of the Father. That means we focus always on proclaiming that Jesus is Lord and that he is a God of love and unity. So

at times we may choose to care about Jesus being glorified rather than me being vindicated, being right, getting even when someone has hurt us, being recognized or anything else. It means deciding that I don't care what that person has done to me, what I care about is that Jesus is honored and his grace is on display in me.

My experience in the body of Christ is that every time there is a conflict, every time someone gets upset and decides he or she must part company with brothers and sisters, something other than the glory of Jesus Christ has become the most important thing. Some agenda, some desire, some personal feeling has become the thing that matters most, and if the unity of the Spirit has to suffer, well so be it.

Not long ago Adam Makos wrote a book titled *A Higher Call*. The focus of the book was an incident that happened during World War II. An American pilot named, of all things, Charlie Brown, was flying his B17 on a bombing run over Germany when it was badly hit by anti-aircraft fire then mauled by German fighter planes. The plane was down to one engine, had pieces of the tail and one wing missing, the nose was shot out and all but two of its eleven guns were out of action. The crew were all wounded. Franz Stigler was a Luftwaffe pilot flying an Me 109 fighter that was sent to finish off the crippled plane. But when he saw the condition of the aircraft and could see the wounded crew members through gaps in the plane's skin, he realized he could not kill them. Though if found out it might mean he would be executed he chose not to shoot them down. He tried to get them to land in Sweden, but they did not understand what he was signaling. Finally he flew close to them so other Germans wouldn't shoot at them and escorted them until they were safely out over the ocean. Brown was able to safely land, saving the lives of his crew. He never forgot the incident. In 1986 he was asked at a speaking engagement if he remembered any particular missions. He told the story of that day. After that he began searching for the German pilot who had saved his life. Four years later he got a letter from Stigler, who was living in Vancouver and who said he was the pilot. He was able to tell details that confirmed he was the one. The two men became close friends and remained so until they both died in 2008. Both men were followers of Jesus. They were at war, but Stigler found something more important than winning the war. That is the message for us. There is something more important than winning the war. It is the love we are to have for each other and the unity Jesus wants us to have.

Paul said we must make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit. That will require some hard, sometimes painstaking, effort. There will be Christians with whom you disagree. There will be Christians who irritate or annoy you. There will be Christians who disappoint you or even hurt you, maybe even deeply or repeatedly. The question simply boils down to this: what matters to us most? Is it our own feelings, our own reputation, or our own welfare, or is it the glory of Jesus and the unity of his family? Do we care enough to make whatever effort is required to maintain the unity that the Spirit of Jesus has created?