
Just Be

John 17:6-19

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 20, 2012 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

Consider with me three scenes. Let me warn you, each of them is quite obscure and far from anything to which we can relate. You'll need your best imagination today. Get ready. First, imagine with me that you are gathered on a Sunday morning shortly after your beloved leader has departed. And in this gathering, you're wondering what life will be like with the one gone whom you've learned to love and trust and depend on for wisdom and guidance. You are wondering what or who will come next. And on this Sunday shortly after this person through whom God had been with you was gone, you are wondering how God will continue to be with you and from where your direction will come. Of course, this takes a wild stretch of imagination. We haven't been in anything like this situation before.

Imagine with me a second scene—equally obscure, of course. You are gathered on a Sunday morning not long after a contentious political scene that has very much involved the religious community. People loyal to God on both sides have not only disagreed with one another and ended up on different sides of the outcome, but they have been hateful and begrudging toward one another, all the while questioning the faith and faithfulness of those on the “other side.” And in this gathering, you are slightly suspicious of those sitting on your right and left, both physically and politically. You are wondering if you can be part of a people so divided. You are wondering if it's not better to surround yourself with people who think exactly like you, who are much more uniform in thought, belief, and practice. And on this Sunday following a time of significant disunity, you are wondering what all of this means for your individual and corporate life of faith.

Imagine a final scene. You are gathered on a Sunday morning where several of those among you are at the beginning of a journey that started long ago but that is continuing now in a different light and will continue on for the rest of their lives. And in this gathering, whether you are one of those for whom the journey is beginning or you are one who is remembering a similar beginning to your journey, you are wondering what you've gotten yourself into. You remember the times you've affirmed your belief and faith in God, you've claimed the faith as your own, and confirmed your commitment to follow Jesus, and you wonder what your new and former commitments to the faith really entail. You wonder if you will be or if you have been a faithful follower of the Way.

These three scenes aren't far from what the first disciples experienced shortly after the ascension of Jesus. They were gathered together after their beloved leader, Jesus, had ascended. Jesus, the one they trusted, the one who guided them, the one who made God's presence so near to them, this Jesus had just departed, and there they were together wondering about their future. We should also remember that, only weeks before, the disciples had been part of a significant religious and political drama with Jesus at its center. The authorities put Jesus to a criminal's death that left people on both sides of the decision more than slightly bewildered and confused. Even Jesus' closest followers and friends abandoned him in the thick of it all. These disciples surely were left wondering how they might find unity in the midst of abandonment and turmoil. And, in gathering only a few weeks after this political and religious drama unfolded, the

disciples were standing at the beginning of a journey that started when they very first encountered Jesus but continued now in a different and new way since Jesus ascended to the Father. There they were, together, wondering what their commitment to the faith might entail.

I suspect that the disciples' ponderings about their situation post ascension included their last moments with Jesus prior to his death. Chief among those memories must have been the time Jesus gathered the disciples together and prayed for them. Our Gospel lesson today picks up in the middle of Jesus' prayer as it shifts to a prayer directly for his disciples. You'll remember that the setting of Jesus' prayer is in a room with his closest followers the night before the Passover. During their time together, Jesus washed his disciples' feet and engaged them in a lengthy, farewell, pedagogical discourse. Throughout this time, Jesus spoke often of the "hour" which was coming, of the "time"—the God appointed, heavenly time—which was about to come, when he would return to the Father. It's after Jesus spoke these many words that he directed his speech to his Father on behalf of the disciples, both those with him that day and those who would come after them.

I want us to consider Jesus' prayer as five short petitions on behalf of his followers. I'll give one word of caution before we go forward. It's easy to hear a prayer, which is directed toward God, as something actually spoken to those who are in the room, so they might act in a certain way. We've all heard preachers who continue preaching their sermon in the prayer time following what they've preached. You know, the "Dear God, please help the leadership of our church vote to change the mission program to the one I just preached about" kind of prayer. Jesus' prayer is not that sort of prayer. And these five petitions are not a "to do" list for those who are really serious about following after Jesus. This is truly a prayer: a request for God to be present and to act. Of course, God's presence and action in our lives likely requires something of us, but the primary point of this prayer is God's action. And it's God's action and presence that creates and enables God's followers to be who and what we are meant to be.

The first petition can be summed up in the word "belong." Jesus prayed, "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word... All mine are yours, and yours are mine... they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world." This is a simple reality of discipleship: God, in Christ, has claimed you as God's own. As those who belong to God, the disciples, both past and present, do not possess or own or belong to themselves nor does the world possess or own them. We've heard it said that in our baptism we give up belonging to ourselves—this is the dying in the waters of baptism—and we've heard that we receive a new place of belonging, a new family—this is the being raised out of the waters into new life. In other words, our association with and belonging to Jesus determines our lives. On that day, Jesus lifted in prayer those whom the Father graciously chose to belong to him. I wonder if you need to know this morning that Jesus prayed about your sense of belonging? I wonder if you need to know this morning that Jesus prayed about your connection to God that comes through God's grace? I wonder if you need to know that Jesus was praying for you?

The second petition can be encapsulated by the word "believe." Jesus prayed, "Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me." Jesus' prayer about the disciples' belief is in past tense. "They have believed." For the disciples, belief came in receiving, knowing, and trusting the message

Jesus proclaimed in word and deed. His message was this: in Jesus, God had come to be with humanity once and for all, and in this way God had been faithful to God's promises. Interestingly, the disciples' past tense "belief" of which Jesus reminded the Father in his prayer came to its time of trial a few short hours after Jesus prayed. And the disciples' sure knowledge and belief was about as stable and strong as the sheet of ice that covers a pond on winter's first freeze. Under pressure the disciples scattered and their sure belief and knowledge cracked. It's as if Jesus' prayer was to remind God that the sometimes wayward disciples were to be known as believers. Almost in spite of themselves, Jesus prayed that God would remember disciples, past and present, as those who believe. I wonder if you need to know this morning that Jesus claimed you as a believer even when your faith seems cracked or frail? I wonder if you need to know this morning that Jesus was praying for your belief? I wonder if you need to know that Jesus was praying for you?

Jesus' petitions continue: "be one." Jesus prayed, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one... I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one... the glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one..." Here Jesus' prayer became most clearly a prayer of intercession. Jesus prayed that God might act for the purpose of making his followers one. Maybe Jesus' intercession is most necessary here because being one as Jesus and the Father are one is clearly an act of God. This is the mystery of the Holy Trinity—three different persons are at the same time one in being. Unity in the midst of diversity—that's a miracle. And Jesus prayed for this very thing. You don't need to understand much about church history to recognize the continual need for Jesus' intercessory prayer for unity. In fact, you don't need to look beyond the walls of this building to see the continual need for this prayer. I wonder if you know all too well the pain of disunity in the church? I wonder if you need to know this morning that Jesus was praying for the unity of his disciples today? I wonder if you need to know that Jesus was praying for you?

Jesus' prayer for his disciples concludes with two complimentary petitions: be made holy and be in the world. We'll take them in turn, though they are not separate in practice. Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth... and for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth." Sanctify is an uncommon word. The Gospels rarely use the word, and the church uses it more rarely still. Sanctify means to make holy, to set apart for God's purposes, to purify. To be sanctified is to be made different; it's to be a sight from which God's light shines; it's to be made like God. To be God-like, to be holy, to be sanctified is no small act. In fact, it's surely an act of God. That broken, fragile, and faulty people can be made holy must be a gift of God's grace; grace to which we must respond, but grace all the same. I wonder if you've been hurt or abused by those who claim to be holy, and therefore question whether God makes anyone holy? I wonder if your sinfulness is all you can see, so you doubt there's any possibility for you to be God-like? I wonder if you need to know this morning that Jesus was praying for God to make you and those broken believers around you holy? I wonder if you need to know that Jesus was praying for you?

Being made holy happens as we are in Christ. But where is the location that we call "in Christ"? Jesus' prayed, "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you... As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Being in

Christ means being with the Father and being in the world. Being in the world the way Jesus was means going to the spaces where Jesus was sent because just as Jesus was sent, so he sent his disciples. Again, Jesus reminded God of something past tense: "I have sent them into the world." Yet, just as Jesus' presence and mission in the world depended on God, so too the disciples' mission in the world depended on God. In reminding God that the disciples have been sent, Jesus reminded God of the grace they needed. Going to the places of vulnerability, suffering, pain, and death, that is, going to the places that Jesus was sent, takes God's overwhelming grace manifest in trust and courage and faith. I wonder if being in the world as Jesus was in the world is a terrifying thought for you? I wonder if your experiences reveal that being in the world ends up a lot like belonging to the world? I wonder if you need to know this morning that Jesus was praying for God to remember your needs as one who has been sent? I wonder if you need to know that Jesus was praying for you?

You, confirmands, you who are just affirming your commitment to the faith, and you, long time disciples, you who may need to strain to remember your earliest commitments to Christ, and you folks in between, Jesus is praying for you. Jesus is praying that God will continually know you as believers and that you will be made holy while being in the world for God's purpose.

You who feel the disunity of the church at its sharpest edges, you who feel the pain of political and theological division within the church, you who feel transgressed by the brokenness of the body, Jesus is praying for you. Jesus is praying that God will give you and your siblings in the faith the grace to be one amidst diversity and disagreement and disillusionment and doubt.

You who feel like you've lost your beloved leader, you who wonder where you'll go from here, you who can't imagine how you could see clearly the road of righteousness on which you've been traveling without your beloved guide, Jesus is praying for you. Jesus is praying that God will give you grace to know to whom you've always belonged and to see who continues to guide you on the holy Way.

Jesus' prayer for his disciples long ago and for us now is that by God's grace we would just be. Be who God made you to be; be who God is calling you to be; be who you can be because of God's grace. Jesus is still praying for you. And his prayer will sustain and connect you continually to God. Just be. Belong, believe, be one, be made holy, be in the world. Just be.