

May 24th, 2020

John 17:1-11 “The Time Has Come”

Hmm. I wonder how Pastor Jesse is going to start the sermon out this week? Is he going to say it? Yes I am! We are in a shift. Maybe we could use another word this week. How about “transition?” We are in the midst of a transition. It’s kind of like the original Star Wars movie when George Lucas would transition between one scene and another. He used all sorts of interesting cross-fades, side-wipes and center-swipes to move the story along. That’s where we are now. We’re somewhere in the middle of where one scene ends and another scene begins. We are leaving one scene where the powers and principalities of the World called the shots, but now we’re entering into a new scene where there is the *potential* for God’s people to step up to the plate and show the world that God’s Kingdom is at hand. It’s just like we’ve been talking about in our Thursday evening study on Revelation. The Kingdoms of the world are starting to fall apart and crumble. That’s when it’s time for God’s people to stand up and be ready to show the world a better way ... the way of God’s Kingdom. But any time God’s people rise up against the Kingdoms of the World, there’s going to be pushback. And we, as a church, have to be ready for when the pushback takes place.

The problem is, as Christ’s church on Earth, we’re kind of lost right now. We’ve grown so accustomed to living in relative comfort with the Kingdoms of the World that we can hardly distinguish between our allegiance to the Kingdoms of the World and to the Kingdom of God. How do I know this? Because politicians, who no matter what side of the aisle they

sit, represent the Kingdoms of the Earth. And churches, who are supposed to be challenging the Kingdoms of the Earth, are sitting back and letting the rulers of the world drive rather than challenging those rulers to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly. No, we just sit back and let the Rulers of the World have a bye because we've forgotten how Jesus stood up to the Powers of the World and commissioned his disciples to do likewise. So if we *are* in a shift, and I believe we are, God's people need to wake up and challenge the powers of the world. How? By following the example of Jesus and re-claiming his values. And we do this by listening to the words of Jesus.

The first week of the series we're on now, we laid claim to Jesus' principle of inclusivity. The second week, we reclaimed a spirit of fearlessness ... of not letting fear dictate our actions. Last week we talked about reclaiming the Holy Spirit. This week I want to reclaim our call to discipleship. Well, what's a disciple? Well, our church is called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Disciples are people who have answered the call to follow Jesus *and* who have been *sent* by Jesus to carry out his mission and witness to the world. So then let's talk about how *we* are called and how *we* are sent. The scripture that Joe read this morning is part of this multi-chapter section in John's gospel that we call Jesus' "Farewell Discourse." Jesus' time on earth was drawing to a close, and so he gathered his disciples together to teach them and inspire them through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This week is the prayer that Jesus lifted up to close this "Farewell Discourse."

In this prayer, Jesus is praying on behalf of his disciples. Not because they weren't able to pray for themselves, but because

Jesus felt the need to let them know that he was serious about everything he had shared with them. Now ... I sort of feel funny about the topic of praying for other people. Don't misunderstand me, I value praying for other people. Praying for other people is a part of my practice. My issue is with the how, when, and where of it all. I don't know whether it's a nature thing or a nurture thing, but I'm very sensitive about how, when, where, and *why* someone prays for me, and how, when, where, and why I pray for someone else. Maybe part of it is a cultural thing too. I don't know. First of all, Jesus has some pretty specific things to say about praying in public. In Matthew's gospel, right before he teaches his Disciples the prayer that we know as, "The Lord's Prayer," he says this –

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

And we all know people who like to make public displays of their prayers. “Look at me! What a pious person I am for praying in public!” No! You think you're being some sort of “good witness for the cause” but all you're doing is pushing people away when you really ought to be drawing them in. And

I don't know about you, but have you ever been in a situation where someone comes up to you out of the blue and says, "Can I pray for you right now?" There have been times when I have said, "Yes" and regretted it, because the prayer becomes a blunt instrument designed to shame me into their belief system. But then again, there have been other times when I have said, "Yes" and I've been on the receiving end of an inspirational soul-lifting moment. Generally speaking, my default answer is, "No thank you, but I really appreciate you asking me first." Which brings me to another awkward situation. *Because* I'm very sensitive about people using prayer as a club to smack me around with, I've become overly sensitive in my own vocation. I'll often ask people that I visit in the hospital, "May I pray with you?" And most of the time, I'll get a look like, "Well of course you idiot, you're the pastor!" Okay, that's fine and dandy, but my vocation still doesn't give me the right to impose something on you against your consent! I had a hospital visit recently where a woman asked me to come to the hospital to see her mom. I agreed. I met the daughter at the hospital and we went to her mom's room. And it became apparent that I was there more for the daughter's sake than the mom's. And as I closed the visit, I asked the mom this question: "Would you like me to pray with you." The mom said, "No thank you." She wasn't being grumpy or hostile. She just said, "No thank you." So I started to leave, and the daughter asked her mom, "What?! Don't you want the pastor to pray with you?" And the mom said, "No." The daughter said, "Well the pastor came all the way over here to pray with you." And I said, "No, I came here to visit your mom because you asked me to." And the daughter said, "Well would you pray for my mom?" I said, "I will pray *for* your mom on my own time, but I'm not going to pray *with*

someone who has not given me consent.” The mom smiled, and gave me a nod of thanks. The daughter glared at me like I had insulted her personally. So yeah ... I’m sensitive about these sort of things.

And yet here we are dealing with a passage of scripture where Jesus just puts on the brakes and starts praying out loud for his disciples right in front of them! “But Jesse, it’s Jesus!” Yes it is! And if you were one of his disciples, how would it feel that your teacher, who you have followed for the last three years, who has served you just as much as you’ve served him, ends his farewell discourse praying ... for ... you? Out loud. To the One he calls Father. To the one you know and understand as the Maker of the Heavens and the Earth just like he’s ... well ... God’s son? It would be *awesome*! And to make it an even more powerful experience, Jesus was praying to God *on behalf* of his disciples. He’s offering up thanks for them and praying that they will be equipped and protected as they carry out his ministry. This is John’s version of Matthew 28’s “Great Commission” except that instead of addressing his disciples directly, he’s lifting them up in prayer and commissioning them to go into the world equipped with the Holy Spirit to carry out his ministry.

Folks, it is important that we, as Disciples, take seriously the commission that we’ve been given to carry out Jesus’ ministry here on Earth. We as a church in the “Kingdom of the Worlds” realm have gotten way too used to a model of church whose purpose is to “provide quality religious goods and services” rather than focusing on discipleship as Jesus did. Here’s where I need to be *really* careful about how I choose my words. Because

I'm dangerously close to saying something like, "If the only reason you're coming to church is for 'quality religious goods and services,' then you're in the wrong church." I'm *not* saying that. For one thing, it makes it sound like we're not concerned about the quality of our ministry. That's not true. For another, it sounds like we're not being very inclusive because what if people *do* appreciate the quality of our ministry and that's why they started coming? So here's what I *will* say. If the reason you come to church ... not just our church, but *any* church ... if the *sole* reason that you put on your Sunday best and come to worship on Sunday morning via car, computer or foot is to be entertained, then I will guarantee that you will be disappointed at some point in time. My desire is for people to come to church in order to find out what it means to follow Jesus, and as we established earlier, Jesus' followers were called "Disciples." That's who we are, and that's what we're about. And that's what *all* churches need to reclaim especially during this shift when we know we can't go back to the way we've always done things.

And let me tell you, there's going to be some grief associated with not being able to go back to the way things were. But that's what was going on with the early believers too. They understood that there's no going back to being with Jesus in Galilee, so they had to ask, "How can we live into this resurrection and how do we live into this new season in our lives? How are we going to live this new life and this new way of being?" We're in the same boat. We're asking similar questions. "How are we going to proceed from here? How are we going to 'do church' in our current circumstances? And just like in the early church, we're going to experience successes and

failures and in the midst of this, we need to ask, “How can we be more patient and graceful with one another?” knowing that church is going to be very different from the way it was. All I know is that we’re going to be much better equipped to address these questions when we re-claim what it means to be Disciples.