

Meet your Greatest Challenge with your Greatest Prayer

John 17:1; 6-9, 17-23.

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What challenges you?

I find certain elements of technology to be challenging...so much so that my teenage boys tend to program my phone and help me put power point presentations together on the computer. However, on the flip side of that, my boys seem to think that a washing machine is the most complex thing on the planet and are very fearful of operating it without my presence to guide them. Go figure?

Challenges normally produce anxiety. We want to know the answer...we want to be able to operate physically like we used to...we want to know the wisest course and make the choice with ease. If a person or a community or for that fact, a nation, continues to face a great challenge without the benefit of a solution, the folks individually and collectively will experience stress that turns into a mental fatigue which then can go into depression.

Three years ago, I was faced with a particularly vexing challenge. My beautiful niece was getting married at a spacious ranch that had a flock of wild turkeys which loved to graze and ...how shall we say this...make regular deposits...on its beautiful manicured lawn. Patty was going to be walking on this lawn in her lovely white wedding dress....that had a flowing train behind it. Can you mentally picture what my sister and I were trying to prevent from happening? Good. The task given to me by my sister and the ranch owner was to keep the Turkey "deposits" scooped up and keep the turkeys off the grass.

Trust me, this is easier said than done.

I will not bore you with the tedious details of how I accomplished this task. I will tell you **how I failed and literally had to start over.** Did you know that if you startle a wild turkey by running after it waving a big stick it will gobble, flap around and ironically, evacuate it's bowels quickly as it heads for high grass? Now you know... I kept the fowl off the lawn but they still fouled it up. I had great intentions. Initially, I accomplished my task. But,

in the end, I literally had to start all over and I had an even bigger mess to clean up.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever tried to meet a challenge with your best intention, but it kind of went south fast and you were left wondering what to do and had an even bigger mess to clean up?

My dear Brother's and Sisters in Christ, we are a community facing challenges. We are a nation polarized and in turmoil. We are asking honest questions amongst ourselves: What are we going to do? How are we going to respond? How do we remain faithful in the midst of these challenges? Where is God in all of this?

Well, the Good news is that we have the Good news! We're a community of faith and we have a biblical witness that has foundational stories which we can draw from. One of the fundamental truths of Christianity is that we're a people who have always been under stress and always been on the move and always seeking ways to be faithful to Christ in cultures that couldn't care less. We need to remember that our story is about who we are, in the bigger picture.

The Biblical Jewish Community, of which we share a heritage has always been a community that has lived between two mountains; Sinai & Zion. Between the wilderness mountain where God offered them words to shape their community...and a mountain that is yet in the future. A future that we know where all nations will streams and all people will be one. This is a core value in Christian theology and of The Disciples of Christ. We are one! All means all!

Less we think the Israelites had an exclusive handle on wilderness challenges and core values, let's not forget the community that existed when the Gospel of John was being written. It is roughly the end of the first century A.D. and there is a community of believers who no longer hold membership in the synagogue. It is a group of Christians who are no longer Jewish...even the one's who want to be. We know that by the year 88 A.D. synagogues are condemning anyone who is claiming that Jesus is the Messiah. This condemnation was public, it was literally written into the prayers of the synagogue. Christians were being expelled from the synagogues. An un-reconciled tension now exists between people who

followed this Jewish Rabbi who no longer can identify with this Jewish community that gave birth to them.

It is a community that is having to rely on its stories to sustain it. It is a community that must cultivate a new, healthy self-awareness that faith in Jesus the Messiah and faith in God does not mean that you will be an autonomous nation, have an ancient temple to worship in and not be scattered. The community that John is writing to is radically re-defining its identity. The stories they are telling center on the fact that they **must put their trust in God.** We are no different from them.

Our scripture this morning from the Gospel of John 17 is called "The High Priestly Prayer." In it, we can see that Jesus did three things. **First** he prays for himself. **Then**, he prays for his disciples. **Finally**, and this is where we read most of our text this morning, he prays for the people who will hear the good news from his disciples and come to believe. Even in the chapters leading up to 17, the farewell discourses, we see that the target audience are people and disciples who are dealing with exclusion and identity. It's like this section of the Gospel is one long Pastoral Care Counseling session given to a community that is in **reformation...and it comes to a head in this marvelous prayer.**

It is not a coincidence that what a community in reformation needs most is wisdom. It is no coincidence that the author of the Gospel of John addressed this...and thus the message, the wisdom of Jesus is applicable to every age, every community, that is undergoing reformation. Jesus is the Word, incarnate. **The word becomes flesh for us and for our salvation.** In this prayer, Jesus recognizes that he and God are one. And as he and God are one, he wants his followers to **be one.** He wants those who follow, and those who hear those who have followed, to be one in God. **To be unified in God. To become one people. To become whole. This my friends is going to take a lot of wisdom to accomplish.**

The prayer that Jesus prays in John 17 is not about passing cups and relieving suffering. His prayer is an intimate look at him trying to give voice to his union with God. The audience for the Gospel of John are past the cross and the resurrection. They have already drunk the cup. The greatest need of this community to which Jesus was praying for, is wholeness. Not doctrinal agreement, wholeness. Not merging with institutional structures,

wholeness; **a wholeness that is experienced by a deep spiritual connection and union with God.**

Mystics from many world religions, including our own know that union with God is the most desired outcome of spirituality. Jesus prays that this might happen, that all may know this wholeness, this deep union with God as he knows it. In verses 17-23, we see Jesus wanting **the identity of the community to be based in the unity he has with God.** Not uniformity, unity. As Disciples of Christ, we understand this distinction in every subtle shade of nuisance it can hold. This is our common cause. This is our strength. **This is our vertical line to God.**

I preached to you today from John 17 because I wanted to lay the groundwork for understanding challenges that face individuals and a nation that is under stress. I wanted to draw your attention to the intimate prayer from Jesus that his followers be whole and be one with God as he was with God. I wanted you all to realize that while you are in uncertain territory personally, community wise or as a nation, **it is not uncertain territory for God or the people of God. Who are we in the bigger picture of the Christian narrative?** I wanted you to know that the audience that the Gospel of John is directed to was not just the early church, but to us today. This message of unity and wholeness was good news then. It is good news now.

When a church and the members of it become consumed with committee meetings and "doing," and stops "being" one with the Father and the Son; when a church focuses on bottom lines and numbers in the pews, **it then starts a pattern of thinking which is focused on human-made solutions.** "If I work harder and longer, then I will save the church. If I neglect my family and my prayer life, then I will save the church." **When individuals see themselves as indispensable to the church, then the church loses it's unity and becomes an institution based on uniformity. Essentially, it puts individuals up on the cross...rather than Jesus.**

No one in the building today, no one who is not present today, belongs on the cross. No one... Only Jesus belongs on the cross. **God will see you through this time.**

So, if we really want to thrive, then we need to put ourselves into a position where we will recognize God. Work instead on our spiritual lives. Work so

much on your inward life that your outward life will clearly show the witness and unity of God. Work on the vertical connection that many of you sensed was missing... Work on "Being" in God. When you do this, then you'll know what you need to be doing for God. For in doing so, you will have answered your greatest challenge with your greatest prayer. - Amen.