

A Storytelling Commentary on John 17:20-26

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These episodes are part of Jesus' prayer for the disciples. They are the climax of the long speech of Jesus to the disciples. In telling the story, the audience is addressed as those who are invited to become Jesus' disciples. The first part of the prayer is specifically directed to the original twelve disciples. Here, however, the prayer is not only for the twelve, but is also meant for all those who will believe, that is, the entire audience of John's Gospel. So at this point in the prayer, Jesus is praying for us. He is including us as the listeners to the story in the community of the disciples and those who are uniquely loved by him and by God.

Now the prayer of Jesus is that "they may all be one." This is the theme and verbal thread that runs through this first episode. The first sentence is: "I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe through their word, that they may all be one." And the final sentence of the episode is: "They may be one as we are one, 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 I've loved them even as you have loved me." If you recognize this verbal thread—"that they may all be one"—it will enable you to learn this episode easily.

There clearly were divisions within the community of the followers of Jesus in the first century. It happened almost immediately, as reflected in Acts 15 regarding the controversy over the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. The prayer of Jesus is that they may all be one just as he is one with the Father. The purpose of this oneness is not mystical union; the purpose of this oneness is that the world may believe that God sent Jesus. The prayer is then addressing a problem in the 1st century as well as the 21st.

In the second episode, the purpose of the giving of Jesus' glory to them is that they may be one and the world may know that God has loved them. This love is potentially present for everyone that they may be completely one. So the purpose of Jesus' glory is that there is oneness. The unity in Christ's glory and in God's love is that they/we may be one.

The second part of the prayer is that the disciples may be with him and see his glory. This is an incredible prayer, a prayer that they may be with him in heaven, in the place of his glory, in the throne room where they can share his place at the right hand of God. It is a prayer for them to participate in the love of God for Christ from the foundation of the world.

This prayer is the vision of a future time when those who believe in Jesus can be present with him in the place of glory. This is in contrast to the experience of the world: "The world does not know you but I know you and these ones know that you have sent me." The purpose of Jesus making God's name known, now and in the future, is that "the love with which you [God] have loved me may be in them." Christ's prayer is that his love will

be in us and that we will know it now and in the future. It is prayer with cosmic possibilities.

The prayer is that God's name may be made known as Christ has made it known and will make it known in the future, so that the love of God can be experienced by everyone. Jesus' yearning is for a complete oneness of unity and love, a togetherness in love that joins those who have believed, those who have been part of Jesus' community but this is also an extension of that community that reaches out and is an invitation to everyone who hears the story to enter into a relationship of intimate love with Jesus.

I suggest that you tell this story in the spirit of Jesus' prayer for the extension of his love and of the love of God to everyone. Search for a way of praying for love, and of expressing in your tone of voice Jesus' yearning, his desire, that all may know and participate in God's love.