

## Plugged In: The Power of Relationships, John 17:20-23, 1/19/20

One of the statistics that researchers are most paying attention to these days is the rapid rise of the “Spiritual but Not Religious” in America. This is a phrase that describes people who say they have a spiritual connection with God, but not with an organized religious group, a church community. In the mid 1980s that % of the population was about 10% and now it is nearly 30%. From 2012 to 2017 that number went from 19% to 27%. True across ages, ethnicities and religious groups, particularly high among millennials. And if we went a layer deeper we would see of those who do say they are spiritual and have a church affiliation, that an even higher percentage disengaged from meaningful involvement and membership at a local church.

Now there are lots of underlying factors for why this is the case. But I have found as I have engaged with so many disconnected from a church community, that the common thing I hear is, I don’t need a church to connect with God. The church is seen more like the package that an iPhone comes in...need it in the beginning, but once you open it up, get the phone and the gear out...you can discard the box. You get all the info from Sunday school teacher, or confirmation, and then you go on to live your life. Is this what Jesus had in mind for his church? Mere packaging? Well the answer is no. Jesus envisioned his followers to be meaningfully connected in community with one another for their mutual spiritual progress and witness in the world. And that an isolated Christian is a foreign concept to the pages of Scripture. Maybe that describes you today. I’m glad you’re here and I hope that the picture we get from Jesus today and next week in this two-part series, plugged-in: the power of relationships, will speak to you, what is missing in your life and you might respond.

One of the clearest pictures we get of Jesus’ vision of community comes from his prayer in John 17, which is what we want to examine today. We are just going to look at 4 verse from this prayer today.

### John 17:20-23

<sup>20</sup> “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, <sup>21</sup> that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

<sup>22</sup> I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

This prayer takes place after the last supper with his disciples and before Jesus is arrested in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus would have walked with his disciples over the Mount of Olives, down into the **Kidron Valley and into the garden**. So this prayer was the last prayer with his disciples before his crucifixion. When you are dying you don’t make small talk, you talk about things that are most important. And in this prayer of Jesus to the Father, He is not only praying for his disciples, but he prays for you and me, if you are a Christian this prayer is talking about you. **John 17:20 My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me**

*through their message.* Jesus very directly is praying for what He wants most for us. And here it is:

John 17:21

*that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.*

Simply put- His prayer for us is unity. That couldn't be clearer. But what exactly does Jesus have in mind when he prays for unity? In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a significant move of ecumenicism to attempt to merge all the mainline denominations and even Catholicism. And the thought was, let's drop any beliefs that divide us. I do not believe Jesus is in heaven lamenting, "If only the Presbyterians and the Baptists and Lutherans could just become the Presbyterians." In fact, I believe in some ways it is part of his plan to reach a variety of different kinds of people who relate to a variety of different ways to express faith and fidelity to God. You may disagree on that point, but I believe that the unity Jesus prayed for is something far more fundamental. Ecclesiastes 4 tells us that a strand of three cords, woven together is not easily broken. Let me share with you three of several cords that weave all Christians together.

### **Three Cords of Unity**

#### **Cord #1 Our Shared Union with Christ**

*<sup>22</sup>that they may be one as we are one— <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me*

The phrase "In Christ" is used 170 times in Paul's letters, and 27 in Ephesians alone. What does it to be in Christ?

Ephesians 1:13

*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation when you believed.*

*Being "in Christ" is the spiritual union with Christ we receive the moment we trust the gospel.*

The death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins and our salvation. Because of our union with Christ every believer will receive all the benefits of Christ. Everything he has we now have. It's like marrying a billionaire. Even if you were poor and owned no property, once you enter that union you now share in the privileges of your spouse's wealth. We have a shared union with Christ- we inherit the indwelling Holy Spirit who convicts us, empowers us, teaches us, comforts us, we now all share a set of core beliefs about God, His Word, the world and life to come. Look around you- many of these people you will be stuck with for eternity. So you better start getting along.

#### **Cord #2 Our Shared Experience as Forgiven Sinners**

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the early church was their amazing multi-ethnic, multi-class fellowship together. There was nothing like this on the planet. Jews receiving communion from Gentiles? It wouldn't have been uncommon for a slave to be a deacon or deaconess among freedmen. This was stunning. Part of the reason this could happen is because Jesus broke down the barriers of ethnicity and class by his crucifixion. Eph. 2 Destroyed the

dividing wall of hostility by his death on the cross. But there is a human dynamic as well- we have a deeply shared experience that unites us.

One occasion I was with a marine friend of mine who had several deployments and we were hanging out and he spotted another marine he never met and they began talking all their inside lingo like they had known each other forever...and then they broke out in the Marine Corp Hymn- "From the Halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli..." They may have never met but they have deep bond from their shared experience as marines and the life and death scenarios they were in. If you are Christian, you have a shared spiritual life and death experience with every other Christ and a song you can sing together with every other Christian...Young and old, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, poor or rich. Urban and suburban. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see." What a deep, rich, unbreakable bond we all have as Christians that goes deeper than even blood relationships. You have this shared experience with a Christian street vendor in Bangkok Thailand, and the Christians in the mountains of Eburru, Kenya, as well as those nearby like mushroom farmer in Kennett, and our African American brothers and sisters worshipping at Union Baptist Church right now. Every one of us who really knows Christ can share the experience of being deeply convicted of sin and lostness and then infinitely affirmed by the love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. When you have been through that experience then it doesn't matter whether or are a D or an R, or our race or anything else.

It was this same spiritual reality that led Dr. King in his early years of ministry to advocate for equality and a brotherhood and sisterhood that went beyond the color of our skin. God gave him a vision, and that vision was to restore the very foundations of what made the early Christian church so powerful: our unity across classes.

Who do you feel more of a sense of unity with? Do you feel more at home with fellow conservatives or fellow liberals than you do your fellow Christians? Do you feel more shared experience around your fellow suburbanites than brothers and sisters in Christ in the city? If so, go deeper! Maybe you need to have the furniture of your identity rearranged by the gospel. You have far more in common than you think if you know Christ!

### **Cord #3 Our Shared Responsibility for One Another**

Another quality that marked the early church was the radical care they had for each other and their community around them.

Acts 2:44-45

***44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.***

Does that mean that there was no private property in the early church. But the point is they were characterized by drastic open-handedness. With their homes, possessions, money, time, love for one another. And it wasn't just to each other. In the early church, it was not

uncommon for unwanted babies to be left at the door of the home of a Christian, or at the river bed where they gathered.

We have a marked responsibility and commitment to one another that is our display of unity. A stingy Christian is a walking contradiction because we all understand as Christians the extreme generosity of God toward us in Jesus, the riches of our inheritance. We don't walk through life with a tie grip like a 3-year-old with a toy saying, "MINE!"

And at the same time, an isolated Christian, not in one-another relationships, is a walking contradiction. Because how can you possibly live the Christian life Jesus envisioned if you are disconnected? We have a shared responsibility to each other that is a cord of unity we have as Christians. One of the greatest encouragements I can hear as a pastor is when people that are sick, struggling financially, in the hospital...and when I call or visit, or one of our other pastors, we hear them say, so and so just stocked my refrigerator, this small group just visited and prayed for me, running out to get some things at the store...and this happens all the time here and it is a beautiful picture of the unity that Jesus envisioned in John 17.

### **Three Cords of Unity**

**Cord #1 Our Shared Union with Christ**

**Cord #2 Our Shared Experience as Forgiven Sinners**

**Cord #3 Our Shared Responsibility for One Another**

Are you pursuing these three cords of Unity? Now, here's why Christ's vision and prayer for unity is so important.

**John 17:23**

*Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

This is a short point, but I want it to come right between the eyes. Unity must be observable by the world. The world needs to see an inexplicably loving community, as our core value says, Unity in diversity. Jesus is saying at least in some ways, the validity of our truth claims must be backed up by our unity if the world will believe. Crazy truth claims...they need to see a community of astounding love.

When we were going through the process of installing our new speaker system, I realized just how little I understand about the vast number of technical components that must be complexly intertwined for things to hit our ears just right. For sound from all the instrumentation we use in worship, all the vocals from our singers to hit our ears with clarity, quality and harmonization. Mics, speakers, mixers, amplifiers, sound board, wiring and wireless signals throughout the room... I will spare you the details... because I don't know them. But I'm thankful for those who do and especially for those who mix it altogether behind the scenes because they do a great job making it all come together. Thanks. Here's what I do know: as beautiful and harmonious and powerful as all these components are when they come together- none of it matters unless it is all plugged into the power source.

This is a physical demonstration of what Jesus is praying for here in John 17. He has built his church to be like our sound system. A variety of individual components, people with a variety of experiences, ethnicities, personalities, purposes that are intricately woven together in meaningful relationships with each other. But it is only when we are plugged into a relationship with Jesus Christ as our source of life that together we create a beautiful, harmonious and powerful reverberation for the world to witness.

**Next Slide** Look negative then positive. What is at stake if we fail operate like Jesus envisioned in his prayer?

One commentary on John 17 says this- Do you know any churches like this: gossip, insensitivity, negative criticism, jealousy, backbiting, politics, an unforgiving spirit, failure to fully welcome people of other races and classes, cliquishness, greed, coldness and selfishness? If so, what you are doing is making Jesus sound like noise to the world. You're not just engaging in this behavior, which is wrong in its own right, but it makes the world shut their ears and say, I don't want to hear anything you have to say. Noisy gong and a clanging symbol...

What happens when we do operate like Jesus envisioned in his prayer? When our church is engaging in loving unity like this with Christ as our source of life, it makes a harmonious, powerful and attractive song for the listening world who comes to hear it. Who doesn't want to be a part of something like that. What will our song be? Will we be known as the church who really loves people. That cares about healthy relationships, families and marriages, that doesn't exclude itself from the world, that's engaged in the needs of our city, welcomes people of all backgrounds. What will our song be?