

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“On the Job Training: Learning to be Loved”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Ezekiel 43:1-5
John 17:20-26

Every Sunday many of you pull one of these blue prayer slips from the pew holders, fill it out and by so doing ask us, as a community, to pray for someone special. Sometimes you ask us to pray for family or friends. Other times it is colleagues at work or strangers whose lives have been wracked by war or natural disasters. Sometimes we pray for people simply by name and at others it is for a particular issue; cancer, healing, safe travel or any number of other immediate concerns. But have you ever wondered what it is that Jesus might pray for if he were here in these pews; if he were to pull out blue slips, write something down, place it in the plate and then bow his head? I ask, not simply as an idle thought, but because that is where we find ourselves this morning in this passage from John. Jesus is sitting with his friends in the upper room, praying. As he does so he prays for himself, that he might be strong in the face of what is to come; for his disciples that they might not be lost; and for us. That’s right, Jesus prays for us. He prays for those who will not know him personally but will know him because of the witness of the church. So, the question is, what did Jesus pray for us. What did he put on the blue slips in the upper room?

The first thing Jesus prays for is that we would become new people, by experiencing the love of God within us. He writes, “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them.” For the writer of the Gospel of John, love is the key. Love is the ground of everything. Later in his letters to the church he will in fact say that God is love. For John, love is not an emotion but the very life-changing power of God unleashed in people’s lives. Love will cast out all fear. Love will make us like Christ. Love will make us capable of loving others. Thus Jesus prays that God will take the love God has for Jesus and implant it in our hearts and lives. And by so doing, change us. By so doing make us new people, fit for new possibilities. Prayer slip number one then is that Jesus prays that we be intimately loved by God.

The second thing Jesus prays for is that we would become a new kind of community by seeing the Glory of God. He prays, “Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” OK, I get it that this whole “glory” thing might seem to be a bit strange; and my interpretation of it, that Jesus is praying for us to become a new kind of community, might be a stretch. But hang in with me for a moment. The Glory of God, is a concept that is used in the Bible from the book of Exodus to the Book of Revelation. It means nothing more and nothing less than the presence of God in the midst of God’s people, changing them from one kind of people to another kind of people. In Exodus, changing them from a wandering bunch of slaves to the free people of God; in Ezekiel, from a bunch of refugees, to a new faithfully worshipping community. In the book of Revelation, changing them from a mortal

people, to those who lived forever. So when Jesus prays for us that we see the glory of God in him, he is praying that the very presence of God will change our faith community from an ordinary church to an extraordinary community in which the love of God is constantly present. Prayer slip number two is that we would become a new kind of church.

The third thing Jesus prays for is that we would help to create a better world by being united one with another. He prays, "I ask not on behalf of these (meaning the disciples in the room with Jesus), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one...and...the glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, even as we are one." Jesus prays for unity. And when he prays for unity he is not praying for us all to go to the same church, or worship in the same way, or hold the exact same doctrine. He is not telling us to be Stepford Christians, who look alike, dress alike and sound alike. Unity for Jesus means that we are to be intimately connected with God, and Jesus and one another. We are to be intimately connected in order that the Glory of God, which was given to Jesus, which is given to us, might shine forth brightly and change not only the church but the world. The image that I offer you is of a Christmas tree. Imagine for a moment if you had a Christmas tree with only one light. It would not really shine forth and touch people's hearts. But with each light that is added, something happens. The light of Jesus' birth expands into the world. This is the reason Jesus prays that all Christians be united, so that the Glory of God, which we are to see and take hold of, empowered by the love of God within us, will shine forth into the world, changing it into the kind of world God desires.

We have been given a great gift. Not only have we been prayed for by Christ, but through his death and resurrection, the possibilities of his prayer have been made real in our lives. The love of God has been poured into us. The glory of God is all around us empowering us to be a new kind of community. And every time we connect with other Christians here or around the world, we change the world more and more into what the Kingdom of God ought to look like. The task for us is to open ourselves to that love of God that is within us; to allow it, to feel it welling up within so that as we become new and different people we might see more clearly the glory of God and more intimately connect with others. In these ways we will be fulfilling the prayer that Jesus offered for us.

My challenge to you then is this, take some time to experience the love of God; to allow the love that is within you to well up and change you, so that you might be one of those lights that begins to change the world.