

That All May Be One

John 17

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That they may be one as we are one.

Jesus is praying out of his unitive consciousness with God,

And he is praying FOR this unitive consciousness to be experienced by his disciples,

And by future believers who call upon his name.

You may be asking yourself – Unitive consciousness? I haven't heard about *that* in a sermon before.

You probably haven't. Most preachers don't go there.

It simply means feeling “oneness” with God or with humankind or with creation.

Such experiences tend to be suspect of going too far in thinking too highly of our own possibilities -

Particularly for Presbyterians who have tended to have a much stronger emphasis on human liabilities.

Direct and divine experiences of God have been scrubbed from the vocabulary of the church.

We have been conditioned to believe that talk about being “one” with God sounds blasphemous.

This is not new...

The reason for Jesus' trial and punishment was, at least in part, for exactly this kind of subversion of religious truth. He would be tried for blasphemy – for claims made by him and about him that he was God's Son. He equated himself too closely with God – which didn't sit well with the religious elite, nor did it sit well with the Emperor who also claimed the “Son of God” title. In this prayer that comes right

before that trial in this gospel narrative, Jesus is prayerfully petitioning God to allow the same such insight into divine union with the holy for his disciples and future followers. That the whole community might be one in love, one in Spirit, that God would be IN them, just as God had been IN Jesus. Jesus wanted this so that the whole world might see and know the intimate bond we have with God, our Maker.

This kind of language gets preachers in trouble with the keepers of orthodoxy – wherever they may show up. You see, experiences of God are tough to manage, and even harder to control. So, it is far better, easier, cleaner, to deny that they exist. We don't talk about unitive consciousness, our ONENESS that we can experience with God or with each other because we churchy-types need individuals to be concerned about fulfilling the merits of their own salvation. It "sells more seats" so to speak, than it does to remind folks that Jesus, Jesus himself, prays for us, right here, to experience the absolute wonder of our unity with God through him. This unity happens in love. This unity is expressed as eternal life – where we recognize just how amazed and awestruck we are that life is 100% a gift from God – and that means all life on this planet – and as far flung as our imagination about the universe can take us. Some feel such oneness through love. Some experience it as wonder. Sometimes it comes in a moment of prayer. Other times it is the peace we feel in a beautiful natural setting. This oneness – simply "is" – and it is how we know God – whether we go to church, or pray, or not.

Professional clergy who get their credentials from the institutional church aren't the ones who usually tell this story.

We hear it and learn it from the mystics on the sidelines who are the keepers of this truth.

And John's gospel, as much as I find it frustrating for other reasons, is the most mystical recording we have of Jesus' spirituality.

The Church has selectively preached John's gospel about belief and about the ticket to heaven,

Not realizing that Jesus has ALREADY prayed for us to know God intimately in the here and now.

How can you be convinced that you “need” the church if you experience God for yourself?

That’s the problem of having an affinity for the mystical if you are also a church professional.

The mystics aren’t always well-received. They aren’t good for business.

This is how spirituality becomes an alternative to religion rather than being vital to any understanding of religious truth – as I think it should be.

You see, I haven’t quite figured out how you have religion WITHOUT an experiential connection to who God is.

But I remember from my seminary days that there were professors who were adamant that “experience” could not be a way of knowing God. ONLY revelation, and the revelation found in Scripture was it, and it was enough. Experience could not be trusted.

I understand their concern – to some extent.

If we let anyone and everyone be able to say, “God told me so.” Then those who use such justification for heinous acts or acts of bravado could be encouraged to get away with anything.

But I dare say that we have a problem on our hands if we dismiss the unitive consciousness experience altogether – just because it can get messy. Spiritual work is the messy side of religion. It doesn’t fit neatly into the boxes or categories, and it is peculiarly particular. No two spiritual paths are exactly the same. God is in the intimate as well as the infinite, and we each experience God in our own ways. But it has been true for as long as humans have talked ABOUT God, they have longed for a connection WITH God. And I truly believe that the longed for connection is the God-sized hole in our hearts that can be filled by allowing our own openness to this prayer for oneness Jesus prays.

This is tough for me as a *mystical* religious professional who wants nothing more than for you to know and experience God in your own life. Then it becomes not just believing in salvation – but knowing God’s love in the depths of your soul. Of course, scripture and sermons and prayer and music and art are a few of the things that can prime that pump – but they aren’t exactly the experience of God in and of themselves. Maybe – on rare occasion – words are inspirational, but more often they are descriptive, or encouraging, or instructive on how to live this life in love. They don’t quite give you the pathway to personal divine revelation, wonder, and awe.

I can’t make that aha God-moment happen for you. Now I can talk about awe, love, and wonder. I can encourage meditation and prayer. I can remind you to stop and reflect on the beauty of nature, the quiet of a sunset, the sound of the morning birds. I can sit with you in deep grief and celebrate with you in ecstatic joy. But the reality is that God doesn’t work on my schedule. God moments are unbidden and often surprising. That feeling Jesus is describing, that “oneness” is fleeting. I have “caught it” but I cannot hang on to it. Neither can you.

The assumption however is this: Jesus PRAYS this for us – that all may be one. That we will seek as he sought. That we will be found as he was found.

Richard Rohr: “The big and hidden secret is this: an infinite God seeks and desires intimacy with the human soul.”