



**“Final Words”**  
**Scripture – John 17:20-26**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, May 8, 2016**

Kudos to our lay reader for reading one of the most awkwardly worded passages in Scripture. Perhaps it reads a bit smoother in the original Greek – but I doubt it!

It is challenging enough to grasp what it means to be IN Christ and to have Christ IN us, but Jesus adds God as a third part of the equation, saying “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” Reading such a sentence, our minds are eager to leap forward to something more intelligible, but this is not gibberish. It points to something crucial in the life of faith.

If you were here last Sunday, you may recall that the gospel lectionary reading whisked us back to the Last Supper. John devotes more attention than the other gospels to a long farewell speech Jesus delivered to his closest friends on their last night together.

Final words often carry extra weight, and Jesus wants his disciples to grasp the gravity of the moment. He has been sharing wisdom with his disciples for three years, and no doubt he worries that once he is gone, their minds will draw a blank. So in his farewell discourse, Jesus highlights the essentials. We can almost hear him say, “If you do not remember anything else, remember this.”

First, he begins the evening with a dramatic gesture that leaves an indelible impression. As the twelve disciples are seated around the table Jesus pours water into a basin, wraps a towel around his waist, lowers himself to his hands and knees, and affectionately washes the feet of Peter, James, John – each of the twelve, including Judas.

In first century Palestine, this was the job of a servant, so it was bound to make the disciples squirm. Their Master took on the role of a servant and cleansed their filthy feet to drive home his point. As he has served them, they are to serve others. That is what it means to be a follower of Jesus – to be one who serves.

Second, Jesus gives them a new commandment. He says they are to love one another as he has loved them. Not only are they to serve others, but love is to be at the core of their being. Every thought, every word, and every action is to flow from love.

Third, he tells them that he will be betrayed and taken from them. Seeing their heightened anxiety, Jesus tries to comfort them by assuring them that they will not be alone. God’s Spirit will be with them through both smooth sailing and turbulent waters.

Finally, as dinner is drawing to a close and immediately before trekking down through the Kidron Valley and to the Mount of Olives, Jesus prays. This morning's reading is the conclusion of his prayer. It is not a private prayer, but one that is intended to be overheard by those gathered for the final meal AND for his followers in every succeeding age. Jesus prays that his followers "may all be one." He prays for unity. We who follow him are not to allow our differences to divide us. We are to respect one another, to care for each other, and to use our diversity to enrich our community of faith, not splinter it.

Jesus knows that such unity does not emerge naturally. In fact, it is nearly impossible to achieve. People see things differently, they hold different priorities, and push hard for their own agenda to triumph. So Jesus prays that God's Spirit will be in them. This is the part of the passage that can be challenging. He prays that his followers may be **in him** and that he will be **in them**. What does it mean for Christ to be **in us**?

Today is Mother's Day, a day to remember and to give thanks for our mothers. Unfortunately, for some it is a day to rant or to ignore because they did not have loving, supportive mothers. For you who would prefer to forget your unkind mother, I hope and pray you have someone else to thank – someone who gave you what a good mother would give.

No mother is perfect, because all of us have our human failings, but some of us were blessed by wonderful mothers and today provides an opportunity to give thanks for such a blessing.

Regardless of the kind of mother we had, our mothers made lasting impressions on us. However, they did more than merely leave impressions on us. They touched our psyches and our souls. They shaped our characters and our values. They are so much a part of us that I suspect many of us have made statements and then said to ourselves, "I sound just like my mother."

Take the next 20 seconds of silence to think of a habit or an attribute or a value or a disposition you acquired from your mother. [Pause] Now, turn to someone sitting near you and tell them what came to your mind. You have one minute, so each of you has 30 seconds to share.

You may say, "My mother gave me a spirit of hope and a drive to do my best. Those are foundational parts of who I am." Such things are so deeply embedded in your essence that it makes perfect sense to say that there is a part of her that is IN you.

In a similar way, God is in us. In the opening creation story in Genesis, we read that human beings are created in the image of God. Recognizing this human-divine connection, Jesus says we are children of God. Augustine writes, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in God."

God is not a distant deity. Rather, like the air that surrounds us and is within us, God is everywhere, pulsating throughout creation, including within us.

We can deepen our awareness of God's Spirit within us or we can allow distractions to dull our senses to the Divine within us. We can enlarge the impact of God's Spirit on us or we can diminish it, by living shallow, self-centered lives.

If you desire to broaden the influence God has on you, prayer is essential. In prayer, we open our souls to God and pray that God's Spirit will fill us. As followers of Jesus, we seek to embody his essence so that we have in us his loving spirit, his thirst for justice, his eagerness to heal and to forgive, his courage and determination, his desire for peace.

For eons, spiritual leaders have shared a simple way of praying in which we focus our attention on our breathing. One method is to select a metaphor for God that works for you, such as: Gracious God or Loving Spirit or Creator of all. Then, choose a simple phrase that expresses your desire – such as: fill me with compassion or give me strength or guide my path. Say your metaphor for God as you inhale. [Demonstrate] “Gracious God” *inhale*. Hold it for a couple of seconds. Then, as you exhale, say your phrase: *exhale* “Fill me with compassion.” Let’s try it together: *inhaling* “Gracious God” – *exhaling* “fill me with compassion.”

For centuries, people have prayed this way. It appears that “the repetition opens a neural and muscular pathway in the brain and body,”<sup>1</sup> which God can fill. This mantra-like way of praying helps us to assimilate God into our being which enables God to transform us into the people God yearns for us to become.

When God is in us, we overcome our small, selfish way of being and grow into something noble. God enlarges our capacity to love and to experience the joy that comes with doing something that enhances the common good.

Early in his gospel, John writes, “For God so loved the world.” When God is in us, our compassion for others broadens and deepens to the point that we cannot witness injustice and be unfazed by it.

A friend of mine who is a pastor in Richmond, Charlie Summers, remembers a man from his first congregation whose name was Stewart. This church was in Washington, DC and Stewart was a police officer. Some evenings, Stewart would go to his pastor’s house and they would head down to the basement and play ping pong. But before they would begin, Stewart would bend over and pull a gun out of an ankle holster and place it on the shelf. When you are getting ready to play ping pong and your opponent places his weapon on a shelf in plain view, you think twice about how important it is for you to win!

Stewart had a tough exterior, but he had a warm heart for the poor, the abused, and anyone who never seemed to catch a break. He was ordained a deacon in that church and led the other deacons into a ministry for battered women. These were women he met while he was on duty. Stewart guided the deacons into setting up a few apartments – safe havens for these women. This was years before battered women shelters were on anyone’s radar. His pastor said, “I talked about the Bible, but Stewart did something about the Bible.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus prayed that the love of God would be in his followers. There’s no doubt that God’s love was in Stewart.

If you see someone being oppressed, and it does not bother your conscience; if you see someone being treated with disdain, and it does not bother your conscience; if you see someone who is hungry and it does not bother your conscience, you are muffling the voice of God within you. God wants injustice to disrupt your equilibrium and unsettle your soul, because it breaks you open to the possibility that you can be filled by God’s love.

Will you open your soul to God?

## NOTES

1. Linda Douty, *Praying in the Messiness of Life*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2011), p. 36.
2. Charlie Summers, “Friends of Jesus,” May 10, 2015.