

Called as the Intercessor
January 24, 2021
John 17:14-24

The Gospel of John was the last of the four gospels to be written, and is remarkably different from the other “synoptic” gospels. One of those differences is that the Gospel of John devotes five full chapters (13-17) out of 21 to the Last Supper. Mark has just 20 verses (14:12-31), Matthew has 19 verses, (26:17-35) and Luke 32 verses (22:7-38). It is not just the amount of material that differs. In John we find lengthy remarks by Jesus to his disciples that are intended to prepare them for what is to come, the “Farewell Discourse.” We previously looked at parts of John related to the Last Supper three times recently. Here are (computer) web pointers to those earlier lessons in case you might want to refer to them.

< <http://www.jbgilmer.com/Messages/Abiding%20Love.pdf> > Nov. 8, 2020, and
< <http://www.jbgilmer.com/Messages/Loving%20by%20Serving.pdf> > Nov. 1, 2020,
<<http://www.jbgilmer.com/Messages/Jesus%20Wisdom%20in%20John.pdf>> July 26, 2020

What we have in the synoptic gospels is Jesus asking for preparation to be made, the betrayal of Jesus, the institution of the Lord’s Supper, and Jesus foretelling Peter’s denial. Luke adds a dispute among the disciples about greatness, and a prophesy about difficult times coming (22:35-38). There is nothing comparable to Jesus’s teaching the disciples at the Last Supper as found in John.

All this material in the Farewell Discourse would have been hard for the disciples to understand at the time. It may be that only John remembered it well enough to pass these words on to us. Or, perhaps only he thought them important enough to include in his gospel. (Consider John 21:25: **“But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”**) Each of the gospel writers had to decide what was most important to include to serve his own goals in writing. John, written last, would not need to repeat all of the material in the other gospels. We can be thankful that Matthew gave us three full chapters of Jesus’s “Sermon on the Mount.” We are thankful for the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke. John gives us the gift of these words in chapters 13-17, that we would not otherwise have.

Also of note is that John is believed to be written by a disciple particularly close to Jesus, identified in the gospel only as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,”

who reclined next to Jesus at the Lord's Supper. We assume that is John, the son of Zebedee. The gospel writer of John seems to have an insight into details in a more intimate and personal manner than the synoptics. He also seems to have followed the more abstract thoughts of Jesus, which might have been lost on others. The whole Gospel of John, for example, starts with a Chapter 1 that is completely different in nature from the others. The same attention is given elsewhere to Jesus's more difficult and abstract sayings, such as those concerning living water and his body as food (John 4:7-10, 6:52-56, for examples).

Chapter 17 has been called "The High Priestly Prayer." Recall how the book of Hebrews, that we studied recently, sees Jesus in the role of High Priest. I believe I have heard Jesus's prayer in John 17 called Jesus's "Pastoral Prayer." Our Bibles (NRSV) title the chapter, "Jesus prays for his disciples." The lesson book refers to it as an intercessory prayer. A full chapter for one prayer may seem lengthy, but that's comparable to the Pastoral Prayers we hear on Sundays, ending with the Lord's Prayer. The prayer can be subdivided into three parts. First, Jesus prays for himself and his mission. Then he prays for his disciples. This can be considered a prayer of consecration. Finally, he prays for the Church, those of his followers then and in the future beyond the few gathered there. That includes us. Today's scripture reading focuses on the part of the prayer where Jesus is praying for his disciples, verses 14-24. I will first focus on 14-19, beginning with 13, to help us understand v14.

¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.^[a]¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.^[b] ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Jesus intends that his disciples have Joy! This, in the last hours before his own trial and death to come. This joy compensates for being hated by "the world." Like Jesus, his disciples no longer belong to the world. Jesus asks the Father that his disciples be sanctified. "Sanctification is more than separation from the sinfulness of the world – that is already assumed (vs. 16). It means dedication and

equipment for their service of God. They are equipped by being brought into the truth, which is ‘the word of God.’” In verse 19, the RSV uses the word “consecrate” instead of “sanctify.” The Greek word translated includes both the idea of being set apart (holy) and to be equipped for a purpose. But it also is a sacrificial term. In verse 19, it is Jesus who is the sacrifice. That sacrifice consecrates Jesus himself, as well as his disciples. They are consecrated in truth, in a way that differs from the sacrificial ritual of the pagan world. (Wilbert F. Howard, *Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 8, Exegesis, 1952, pp. 749-750, and William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1975, p. 198)

Continuing with verse 20 and following,

²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,^[c] so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ 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 have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴ 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 me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

The first remarkable thing to note is that in verse 20, Jesus expands his prayer beyond those present to others of his disciples, even us today. We believe because of the good news, the gospel, passed by those first disciples to others, and from them to yet more, spanning two millennia, what, on the order of 60+ generations? The words “that the world may believe,” in verse 21, has been fulfilled among those open to listen over that span of time since. As John wrote these words, he would have seen that over perhaps just two generations.

Even more remarkable is Jesus’s prayer, concerning all of these of his disciples, “**that they may all be one.**” He explains further, “**As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ...**” Unity with God? Are we to be in unity with God just Jesus is? Just as is someone who is one of the Persons of God, in the trinity? This is a mystery. It is hard to understand in familiar terms. But I’ll try to convey a bit of how I understand it.

First, we don’t give up who we are, our personhood. We are not to be so much one with God that we have no independent life. We’re not robots. That’s not

what God created. He created us as independent beings, but beings “in the image of God.” To me, the creation stories speak of God wanting others with whom he could share fellowship. Because of sin, mankind lost that unity, or fellowship, with God. We, like God, have in us a need for fellowship, for interactions with other independent beings. We are perhaps especially conscious of that during the isolation of this virus epidemic. Jesus was able to maintain his special fellowship with God even during his mortal ministry on earth. He was independent of God, but he was also one with God. And, he looked forward to being “glorified” and present with God. Jesus is telling his disciples, and us, that we too are part of that tight knit fellowship, that love, and can look forward to the same. The world as Jesus was experiencing it then, and as we do now, is transient. God has been seeking us in love to join in this unity since “**the foundation of the world**” (v. 24). This unity, displayed by the disciples in the world, will lead others to God; so it has been through the ages since.

Second, just as unity does not mean giving up our individual personalities, it does not mean everyone must be the same in talents, dreams and call. We are all different. As evidence of that, consider that the synoptic gospels go back through Mark to the apostle Simon Peter. Many of the words and stories in those three gospels reflect how Simon Peter heard and understood Jesus. Simon Peter was a man of action. Sometimes he acted first and then heard about it later. There is in those gospels action, miracles, parables, and teaching. Most of it is very concrete and understandable, with relatively little abstraction. In contrast, John saw, heard, and understood Jesus from a quite different perspective. Jesus’s words are deep, and people have trouble understanding. But John gives us those words and works hard at helping convey their meaning. John himself seldom speaks in any of the narratives; he’s almost completely opposite of Simon Peter. But Jesus loved them both. Through both of their perspectives were are all the more blessed today. Just so, each one of us is different, has a different way of seeing and understanding God, and a different calling consistent with how we are made.

Third, even though we differ in various ways, we are to be unified in our mission, the mission Jesus mentions right here. From verse 23b, “... **so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.**” We, all of us who are disciples of Jesus, are to live out God’s love in a manner that shows, and that love will be seen by the world. Those of the world will hate us for it. But (returning to where we started) the joy we have in that unity with God and Jesus will sustain us despite that. And, some in the world will find in our

unity with God through Jesus, as shown by our love, a pathway to God for themselves.

Is there, anywhere else in the gospels, an intercessory prayer? In Luke there is just one brief mention of one, Luke 22:32. The Lord's Prayer does not include intercession. It recognizes God's glory and power, asks for our needs, asks for forgiveness, and there is a recognition of God's power, and a closing Amen. But the heart of John's gospel is Christ's intercession for us with God, that we may be made one.

This prayer by Jesus for the sake of His disciples is an "intercessory" prayer. He, Jesus (first person) is praying to God (second person) on behalf of someone else, his disciples (third person). As such, it is also a model for what we are to do. We, too, are to love and care about others, and prayerfully hold up to God our appreciation, concerns, and wishes for those others for whom we pray. Those others for whom we pray, in a sense, don't require us to do so. They are perfectly free to raise their own concerns directly to God. God is no less aware of their needs one way or the other. Yet, in a strange way that is hard to truly understand, those intercessory prayers matter. When we pray, we are thinking of those we pray for. Our minds are on them, and how they are facing their problems. It may come to mind how we can help them and others like them. Such prayer contributes to that unity, that fellowship we share. We are to help bear one another's burdens, and that is one way in which we do so. Just as Jesus intercedes for his disciples and us, and helps us bear our burdens.

Prayer: Jesus our intercessor, don't stop praying for us. We need your prayers for so many things, including our own ability to pray. Thank you, Holy Spirit, that you intercede for us. Amen.