

# Network with Christ's Church

## *Bethany's Call:*

John 17:20-24

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This fall we have revisited our roots, examined the Scriptures and pondered God's vision for our future together. What is the Spirit of Jesus doing with you and me? No father is honored by the ignorance of his children, and we are children of the Heavenly Father, not zombies! Jesus told his disciples in John 15 that they are not ignorant servants, but friends "in the know". Jesus shared everything with his disciples. The Spirit of Jesus does the same. The Spirit coaches us, so what is God saying to you and me?

This morning we heard how God worked in the broken body of Andy Rodriguez through the faith of Santiago Pena. Why has God given us brothers and sisters like Andy and Santiago? Are we to learn something from them? Are we to join hands in some way? Are we to ignore these brothers? Are we to not notice those who lift up the name of Jesus Christ in our community, who carry the name Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic or Orthodox? Are we to ignore their presence? Why are these believers in Rochester at the same time we are?

Founding pastor, Richard Harper, carried a three-fold mandate from Jesus in forming this congregation. First, we were to bring a faithful witness to Jesus Christ. That requires complete obedience since Jesus is Lord. Second, people were to experience life in Jesus' name. We were founded to be a restorative fellowship where rebirth and renewal happen. Finally, the founding pastor saw this congregation fully connected to the universal church. He declared:

*Bethany Church will not be the rival of any other church in Rochester. Rather, we will partner with them in the upbuilding of Christ's Kingdom here. Bethany is now and ever an integral part of the Church Universal, the Church of Jesus Christ.*

God's vision at our founding calls for us to be more than complementary of other congregations. It calls for us to walk hand in hand with those who lift up Jesus. It calls us to respond to the Holy Spirit who works through Jesus' prayer for unity.

**Jesus prayed for our unity.** His prayer wasn't focused on the Twelve Disciples or his 1<sup>st</sup> Century followers. Jesus prayed for *all* who would believe as a result of their testimony. Jesus' prayer encompasses you, me and all the believers in this city. His prayer isn't limited to believers in Rochester; but because believers in a city live in proximity, unity is either daily expressed or denied by our actions.

Jesus prayed that our unity would parallel the unity he experiences with his Father:

*My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one...*  
(John 17:21, NLT)

What does it mean for us to be one as the Father and Jesus are one? Listen to more of his prayer:

*My prayer for all of them is that they will be one... just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us...* (John 17:21, NLT)

Jesus prayed that his relationship with the Father would be reproduced in us. The Father would be in us. Jesus would be in us. We then would be in him. Like Jesus, we would feel and experience *oneness* with the Father and *oneness* with each other. As one people, we would not have a double-mind. We would not hold offenses against each other. We would not lift up how we are different from each other. Instead, we would work together to fulfill our Father's will.

To accomplish this, **Jesus gave his glory for our unity.** He prayed:

*I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are — I in them and you in me, all being perfected into one.* (John 17:22-23, NLT)

What glory did Jesus give his disciples so that they may be one? Glory is an accurate expression of something wonderful. The glory God gave to Jesus and that Jesus gave to his disciples is the Spirit that was in Jesus. That is how the disciples could be one because they

shared the same Spirit, the same love, the same forgiveness, the same counselor. We are not bonded together by the concept or call of God's love. We are bonded together by the experience of love that forgives and changes us, God's Spirit of love. The Apostle Paul wrote:

*God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.* (Romans 5:5, NIV)

A United Methodist pastor told me Friday that her father recently completed ALPHA, a course we will soon offer again here. With a tear in his eye, he told her: "I have been active in the church for 50 years, but now just realized that I could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ." John Wesley who founded Methodism believed in the concept of God's love, but it wasn't until his heart was "strangely warmed" that his life was changed by the love of God. God loves you and me personally. It is one thing to believe it. It is another to experience it, and have that love burn inside us. That love makes us want to worship, know and serve God. That love makes us want obey and please Jesus. That love makes us want to care for those lost souls searching for meaning, those lost souls hungering for a fulfilling relationship. That love calls us to honor and value "the least of these," whoever qualifies for that label. That love moves us to kinship and partnership with other believers in celebrating and making God's love known.

**Jesus sought complete unity to let the world know.** Jesus prayed for unity among us believers that world might see the love it seeks. The world is dying from the pursuit of illegitimate loves. God made us for love, but the power and respect we pursue can't imitate it. Money can't purchase it. Achievements can't win it. Even relationships become self-serving in the quest for love. We demand love from one another, but it doesn't heal our hearts or fill the holes. When God's love overwhelms us and guides our relationships, we become pictures of hope for the world about us. This is Jesus' prayer for you and me.

Jesus' Spirit of love draws us together, and Jesus is revealed as we *are* together. Jesus promised, "***For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them***" (Matthew 18:20, NIV). When we network together, Jesus is with us in a powerful and unique way that is not otherwise duplicated. Furthermore, Jesus networks us beyond congregational and denominational ties. When Philip, the evangelist, left Jerusalem and proclaimed the gospel among the despised Samaritans in Acts 8, God's Spirit moved powerfully, and even those committed to other religions and occult practices converted as they witnessed miracles performed in Jesus' name. However, when all these new converts in Samaria were baptized, they did not change. They did not taste the love of God. They had no inward assurance of forgiveness. They did not experience or receive the Holy Spirit. The Jerusalem Church heard about this and sent Peter and John. Only as the Samaritan believers received the prayer and ministry of the Jerusalem Church, as Peter and John placed their hands on the converts and prayed, did the Spirit of God flood their lives. God networked the despised with the chosen. God destroyed any notion of independence or separation among his people.

You and I will never taste the fullness of Christ or the full joy of our mission unless we network with other believers and other believing peoples. God is revealed when Christ's whole body fits together as one temple. Then God's love and power to heal human lives and relationships are on full display. Then the world will know how much God loves them!

How are we resisting God's Spirit of love and unity? How are grieving our Heavenly Father and separating ourselves from our brothers and sisters? There is forgiveness and a fresh start. How are we working with our brothers and sisters to please God and save his lost children? Are we one with Jesus? Are we one with our Father? Are we one with each other?