

Being In Christ

Psalm 97
John 17:20-26

Writing on John 17, commentator Merrill Tenney says, “Jesus wanted to include (the disciples) in the inner fellowship of the triune God.” That one sentence contains a tremendous amount of teaching. We will work through all of it. Then we will apply it to the tremendous need our nation currently has to heal and to make transformative, necessary changes. But first, a story.

On February 7th, 1984, Bruce McCandless became the first astronaut to make an untethered space walk. Using hand-held propulsion devices, he moved around outside Challenger *without any physical connection to the shuttle*. (Yes, Challenger was the one that blew apart during a launch two years later.) During the space walk McCandless observed that, while he and Challenger appeared stationary relative to each other, they actually were orbiting the Earth at approximately 32,000 miles per hour. Hearing himself make this comment, “Kind of freaked me out,” he said at a post-mission press conference. He continued, “For a few moments I felt the most alone I can ever remember feeling. What if we separated?”

In our home we note with delight the way our dogs often follow us around the house. We talk about their instinctive need to belong to the pack. Humans are wired

much the same way. We dislike feeling alone so strongly our lonely emotions can blend into fear and even anger. In fact, the book of Genesis tells us one reason God created us was to enter into fellowship with us. God made us for community. As we struggle to understand mass shootings, a profile has emerged. Common to virtually every shooter, this profile includes the lack of community they have experienced. They often come from dysfunctional families. They therefore miss out on the healthy emotional nurturing most of us blessedly received growing up. God wired us for community. We need to belong to family, church and other “packs”.

We return to commentator Tenney's quote: “Jesus wanted to include (the disciples) in the inner fellowship of the triune God.” Our passage follows close after Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, a lengthy and deep statement about his identity as the Son of God who must perform the ultimate sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world. Just as Hebrew priests sacrificed animals on the altar to pay for their owners' sins, so Jesus sacrificed himself for our sins. He follows this prayer with a long treatment of his relationship with the Father. Finally, he prays for his followers and—in our verses—future followers who will come to him through those first incorporated into his communion: the disciples listening to his long prayer. He says, “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.”

But Jesus wants more than followers. He prays, “that they all may be one, even as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee.” Again, Jesus wants his followers to join in the fellowship of the triune God. A few chapters back he said, “I and the Father are one.”

The Trinity is a complicated and profound doctrine. But it boils down to the teachings of Jesus about the three ways in which God interacts with humanity. God the Father, the Creator and law giver, the judge, is one face God shows us. Jesus the Son, the Savior, is another. The Holy Spirit, God at work within and between us right now, is the third. These three facets of God, the Trinity, the triune God, are not three distinct beings. They are, rather, three ways in which God reveals God's self to us. And, Jesus tells us, within themselves they experience community.

When we join in the fellowship of the triune God, Jesus says, we receive the glory which he received from God. But glory here does not mean renown. It refers instead to the honor Jesus received from God only after he had suffered the shame and pain of the cross. Hebrews 2:9 tells us, "But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one." This circles us back to his priestly role as the one-time sacrificial lamb for all. As the old hymn says, Jesus Paid it All. Yet here in John 17 we find that all this theology belongs under the theme of the unity within God's being, and the unity we have with God. Jesus wants to share his hard-earned glory with us, as well.

We need to address one last point before we can apply it all to the current, disastrous state of our national culture of violence. The Apostle Paul often wrote of "being in Christ". Jesus ends his prayer with a sort of definition of what that means. "I made known to them thy name...that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in

them, and I in them.” Remember, the “them” refers to the original disciples *and* those like us who came to believe in Jesus through their work of evangelization down through the centuries. They have helped us become *in Christ*. This means we have experienced the love of God through fellowship with God. For Paul, being in Christ meant entering into a genuine relationship with God the Son. In that relationship we receive and we give love, the love of God. Thus, being in Christ means living in the loving fellowship for which God created us in the first place.

The message we have to offer the world is that God is love, and that God wants to have fellowship with us. In that fellowship we experience the sense of belonging to community which we so deeply need. Crucially, this is the community ***of God***. In it we receive God's healing, learn God's truth, and enter into the embrace of God's love. This is precisely what our culture needs. Our culture does not need Christians who separate themselves from the rest of the population. This comes across as judgmental, largely because it is. Our culture does not need Christians who triumphantly declare they have the truth and the rest of the world just needs to shut up and listen to it. This comes across as arrogant, largely because it is. The world does need Christians who, through word and deed, communicate that they have received healing for their brokenness—whatever form it may take—in the fellowship of Christ.

In an opinion column published in last Thursday's Wall Street Journal, Peggy Noonan spoke of a troubling aspect of our reaction to mass shootings: the numbing of our hearts. Yes, she wrote, we wonder about America. (As she put it, “Why can't we

handle this?") Yes, we worry about the future. ("What will it be like if this continues?") She tentatively criticized the police and their cowardice—tentatively because she did not then know as much about that atrocious aspect of this whole tragedy as we know now. She gave specific and warranted critiques of the predictable ways left and right react to mass shootings. And she urged us not to grow numb.

Ms. Noonan started her conclusion with this amazing paragraph: "I continue in a kind of puzzled awe at my friends who proceed through life without faith, who get up and go forward without it. How do you do that? I tell the young: I have been alive for some years and this is the only true thing, that there is a God and he is good and you are here to know him, love him and show your feeling through your work and how you live. That it is the whole mysterious point. And the ridiculous story, the father, the virgin, the husband, the baby—it is all, amazingly, true, and the only true thing." There is a God, and he is good and you are here to know him—to enter into relationship with God—to love him—as God has loved you. Jesus wants to enter into fellowship with us. In that fellowship we experience healing and love.

The world, not just our broken culture, but the whole world, needs fellowship, healing and love. Especially when we turn on the news to hear a report of yet another demented loner/gamer/paranoiac male with a semiautomatic rifle in his hands killing people randomly. This is our message. Enter into fellowship with Jesus. Our message must not be the whole of our nation's response to the shootings. Let the politicians find the backbone to enact the necessary laws and policies. Let the schools

develop, and actually **follow**, protocols aimed at hardening their campuses. Let the police quit protecting their own hind ends and start protecting nine year-olds. And their teachers. But we have this message. We need to share it.

Peggy Noonan ended with a series of images from Uvalde, Texas. She included news footage of women going to a Roman Catholic Church in order not to be alone. She wrote, "I don't mean for 'the consolations of faith,' I mean the truth is its own support. Consolation is not why you believe but is a fact of belief and helps all who have it live in the world and withstand it. I am so glad for the people of Uvalde this weekend for only one thing, that so many have that." I can tell you that as a Calvinist I have no faith in human nature. I have precious little faith in our national politicians—of any political stripe. Nor do I place my hope in our inadequate mental health system, the National Rifle Association or even my own wisdom. But I do still have faith in God.

Jesus wants to have fellowship with us. In that fellowship we find healing and love. That is our message. As Peggy Noonan almost said, that is the one true thing. Share that message as you can. No doubt people will talk about Uvalde, Texas for the next few days, even weeks. When they do in your presence, can you witness to your faith in the loving healing of God? Many of you would be much better than I at finding the right words in the moment. But so long as you come across as sincere, ("Yes, I really do believe in God.") and humble, ("I'm just one follower of Jesus.") your witness might just help one more person enter into fellowship with Jesus. And that would be a very good outcome from a very bad situation.