

That They May Be One

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on May 17th, 2026 – John 17:1-11)

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Jesus is speaking just before he will be betrayed, arrested, denied, sentenced, killed and then appear once more to his frightened band of disciples. The reading we have before us is part of what we know as Jesus' Priestly Prayer, a prayer for his followers. And what is the gist of that prayer? Unity or oneness.

In the eleven verses we have before us, John emphasises just how united Jesus is with God the creator/father. Jesus and God are deeply interconnected – they share the same task, they go about the same works. They have a common goal – to bring wholeness and life to all. They trust the people they care for to each other. There is an equality and respect for each other here. This is complete togetherness, complete sharing, complete unity, reciprocal love and respect, oneness.

At the heart of the gospel and at the heart of Jesus' prayer is unity and oneness. Perhaps we might term this **at-one-ment**, atonement but not in the sense of a violent sacrifice for a vengeful God that we have often understood Jesus' death and resurrection to be about. Rather **at -one-ment** – being at one with God, no violence or sacrifice needed, rather respect, understanding and love.

So how might we understand what unity and oneness is? I did a bit of a check of the definitions and synonyms of the word unity. Here is a sample of what I found.

- Unity is a state of being united or joined as a whole.
- Unity is a state of forming a complete, yet complex and harmonious whole.
- Unity is shared participation and a united whole.

Some of the synonyms are – consensus, harmony, peace, solidarity, interconnection, oneness, togetherness, reciprocity, like-mindedness, kinship, fellowship, communion and sticking together.

Some words indicating the opposite would be – disagreement, discord, fighting, division, opposition.

Some of these words and ideas are helpful for us as we try and understand the kind of unity for which Jesus' prayers.

This unity will need work too. It will require us to really understand and accept each other, despite our differences. Unity, I don't think is uniformity rather it is the welcoming and accepting of difference. It will need us to include and welcome all rather than exclude those we don't agree with or fear. It will need respect. It is about wholeness for each of us, for this church community, our society and the world. It will lead to fullness of life for all, freedom for all and joy.

I tried to do an acrostic for the word unity as it pertains to us living out our faith in Jesus, and this is what I came up with:

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U – Understanding, as we really try to understand each other, we will learn to celebrate our differences and learn from them, leading us to be accepting of our diversity and united in love.

N – Nurturing, as we care for each other, stand up for each other, protect each other (didn't Jesus as part of this prayer, pray that God would protect his followers) we will build unity.

I – Inclusive – to be unified we all need to belong, no one can be excluded, exclusion means we are judging someone for some reason. When people are excluded from each other there is competition and I would argue that is one of the things that leads to conflict and violence.

T – Togetherness – in Jesus and God we see absolute togetherness, the same purpose, an absolute trust in the other, a bond that is strong. We can achieve so much more when we act together rather than pulling against each other. Here power is shared and no one lord's it over the other.

Y – Yoked – think about animals that are yoked together. They work together to carry a load, they share the burden, they help each other out, together they are stronger. Our work or mission to share the love of God, to witness to the love and forgiveness of God is a shared task and works better and is more efficient when done together.

This week marks the beginning of the week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This is based on part of the prayer which we have before us, "they may be one so that the world may believe" (John 17:21). In 2026 it's theme is: ***"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling"*** (Ephesians 4:4), which is just another way of seeing the verses we have from John today.

This week people will pray for unity in the Christian church and we need this. However, I want to suggest that it should go much further than that, to the ends of the earth.

In our reading from Acts today which hints at Pentecost, where the believers are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, they and we are reminded that they/we are given this gift so that they/we will be witnesses to the ends of the earth, witnesses to the love of God everywhere.

I don't know if you saw any of the footage of the Jerusalem Day or the Flag marches in Jerusalem this week. Israeli's march through the streets of East Jerusalem to mark the end of the war there in 1967 when they captured and occupied East Jerusalem. They march through the Muslim Quarter, simply in order to provoke, harass and intimidate and are violent towards the Palestinians there who are simply going about their daily lives. Some peace groups (including Jewish peace groups) attempt to shield them, but they too are moved on by Israeli forces. The Israelis' chant things like – death to the Arabs, may your village burn, people are called dogs and worse. I heard one young Israeli woman answer the question – is it not possible that people could live together peacefully like they used to? Her answer (which I found vile) – was you don't live beside cancer. This all takes place in the land of Jesus who called for unity.

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Our world needs unity. Unity within ourselves (heart and head), with others, with our world.

Jesus prays for unity for us all, but this unity has a purpose, the purpose to witness to all the earth of God's care and love for all.

Let's play our part in bring unity and sharing God's love and wholeness into our world.