

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 17:20-26

I'm praying not only for them but also for those who will believe in me because of them and their witness about me. The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me. The same glory you gave me, I gave them, so they'll be as unified and together as we are—I in them and you in me. Then they'll be mature in this oneness, and give the godless world evidence that you've sent me and loved them in the same way you've loved me.

Father, I want those you gave me to be with me, right where I am, so they can see my glory, the splendor you gave me, having loved me long before there ever was a world. Righteous Father, the world has never known you, but I have known you, and these disciples know that you sent me on this mission. I have made your very being known to them—who you are and what you do—and continue to make it known, so that your love for me might be in them exactly as I am in them.

“The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.”

Oh, how the world needs to see Jesus. As if there were not already enough tragedies that are overwhelming our emotions and thoughts with anxiety and questions—such as the war in the Ukraine and the shootings at the Tops supermarket in Buffalo, NY—and in reality, that's only the tip of the iceberg; the events of this past week involving the elementary school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, rocks like an earthquake at the very foundation of our faith. How could this have happened? What was Salvador Ramos thinking? And of course we ask, “Why God?”

We struggle to make sense of it all; but brothers and sisters, there is no making sense of this violence. It is evil. While we may feel safe in our cocoons of life—at least until something like this happens—we cannot ignore the reality that evil is alive and running rampant all around the world. People **choose** the path of evil for whatever reason and inflict pain and suffering on others—sometimes, as a heinous monster for the whole world to see. It has been that way since the days of Adam and Eve. And God, weeps. God weeps, for once again, someone has chosen evil over Him.

As the news unfolded on the events of Tuesday, I wondered how I was going to address this tragedy. Immediately, I thought about throwing out the whole service that I had already planned for this morning. I went to bed that night, trying to hear God's leading for how to change it. That usually means that instead of sleeping, I toss and turn as I work, instead of sleeping.

But, amazingly, by the grace of God, dozed off, and in the morning, I was not feeling the urgency to change the service. I revisited the lectionary Gospel text I had chosen to use, which was read for you this morning, and realized this was exactly the text I needed to use, for just such a time as this. However, I had this morning's scripture read from the Message translation instead of the usual NRSV translation of the Bible, because I believe this is one of those texts that, in many translations, can be confusing.

As we focus our attention on what I believe that God wants to say to us this day through this text, we should note that, these words from Jesus were spoken to his disciples when he was with them in the upper room, before his arrest and crucifixion; but they are definitely intended for us, too. Jesus had a lot to say to them about what was to come in the future for him and for them. He also had a lot to say about the state of the world then and in the future. Take time to

read again, or for the first time, perhaps, chapters 13-17 in John. This particular text that we read today is a portion of a prayer Jesus was offering to God for his disciples and for future disciples.

In chapter 15:18-16:6, Jesus spoke on matters concerning the world. He didn't paint a rosy picture for them. He already shared with them that the evil in the world would try to destroy him. It wasn't going to be any easier for them; particularly, as they continued his work to build God's kingdom. If it wasn't going to be a cake walk for them, why should we think it would be easy for us who seek to be faithful to the call of Christ on our lives. The world was a mess then, and Jesus knew it wasn't going to get any better because there would always be people who would choose evil over the way, the truth, and the Life, over Jesus. And the world as a whole would suffer because of this.

Listen to these words from 15:18-19: *"If you find the godless world is hating you, remember it got its start hating me. If you lived on the world's terms, the world would love you as one of its own. But since I picked you to live on God's terms and no longer on the world's terms, the world is going to hate you."* I hear him saying that anything that is of God—all that is His goodness—is hated by the evil in the world.

And listen to these words spoken by Jesus in verses 21-25: "They," (the world), *"are going to do all these things to you because of the way they treated me, **because they don't know the One who sent me.** If I hadn't come and told them all this in plain language, it wouldn't be so bad. As it is, they have no excuse. Hate me, hate my Father—it's all the same. If I hadn't done what I have done among them, works no one has ever done, they wouldn't be to blame. But they saw the God-signs and hated anyway, both me and my Father. Interesting—they have verified the truth of their own Scriptures where it is written, 'They hated me for no good reason.'"*

Jesus will come to help them and still the world will hate them. Then Jesus went on to say, intensifying the significance of the point he was already making in 16:1-4a: *"I've told you these things to prepare you for rough times ahead. They are going to throw you out of the meeting places. There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he's doing God a favor. They will do these things because they never really understood the Father. I've told you these things so that when the time comes and they start in on you, you'll be well-warned and ready for them."*

Jesus knew the world was going to continue to be a mess. People always had and always would continue to choose to do horrible, unthinkable things to one another because they did not and do not yet know God. They may not know of their own account because they don't want to know. They may find the enticement of evil things to be more attractive to the life they want to live. Or they never heard about God and the loving kingdom He wants to build, including how to be a part of the kingdom. They may never have been touched by the presence of God's love; but instead, they may have only known the plagues of evil in their own lives.

All this is to say and remind us that from the beginning of time, God has given humanity free will, and there will always be those who will choose evil over good, for whatever reason. I believe, we were given free will because it is the only way we will ever truly know personally the love of God and how to love God. It is the only way we will be able to truly have an intimate relationship with him and with each other. While this is no consolation for the victims of evil actions, it is reality.

So unfortunately, that means evil also has the availability to rear its ugly head. We don't like that. We say, stop the evil in our world, God, but humanity has already chosen. It wants its own way sometimes. We may not even begin to think of doing anything as evil as Ramos did, but we all at some time or other, turned our backs on God in order to have what we wanted and sometimes it results in hurting others. This reality in no way excuses Ramos or any other murderer's behavior. Don't even begin to think that it does. Ramos made the absolute worse choice possible.

Now, if you can imagine it's possible, there is a message of a hopeful solution to this warning of all the doom and gloom of the world. Beginning in 16:7, Jesus reaffirms and explains to his disciples more about the Counselor—the Holy Spirit—who will come to help them after Jesus is physically gone from their presence. This same Great Spirit is available to us too.

Jesus' prayer offered for his disciples then and for all future disciples, including you and me, that we will become one with him—God the Father and the Holy Spirit. His prayer is that we will allow the Three-in-One to live in us making us one with this amazing holiness and goodness. Not only creating this strong unity with him but also, because of this connectedness, uniting us with one another.

Jesus knew and he wants us to know that this unity is crucial to the exercise of bringing hope, healing and change to the world. We, as believers, have heard the Good News of Jesus; and, through him we know God. There's no turning back from that although we might choose to walk away. Woe to the one who makes that choice. We also have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to guide us and empower us to bring light and hope to this world that is broken and full of hatred.

When we cry out to God—"Why don't you do something to stop this?"—He tells us that he already did. He created us and empowered us with his Spirit to help us. As we are one with the Holy Trinity living in us and we make God real to our world. We bring hope and healing to the world by sharing God's touch and love through our words and deeds. We make God known to our world, even to those who may not want to hear or see God. **We are responsible** for presenting him to them. If Christians do not do it, no one likely will, and there will be no hope for our world.

We may not be able to prevent all bad things from happening, but we certainly must try to do what we can, beginning in our own neighborhoods. Our efforts may throw a monkey wrench into the hurts or anger of one toying with the choice to do evil things. They may not be plans for the sort of evil we've seen happen this past week. We never really know, but all evil needs to be confronted by God's presence and love.

At the same time, as we are one with God, the Son, and the Spirit, we have this unique ability to offer God's presence and hope to victims of the violence and injustice perpetrated by evil. Let us also share the same with even those not directly violated, yet effected by what has happened, including you and me. Sorrow, grief, fear and anger have been a burden on our hearts, too. We need comfort and hope. We can offer that to one another.

We cannot wait for someone else to fix the world for us. That would only be an endless wait, and Jesus makes it clear that waiting endlessly instead of answering the call **to make God known** to the world is enabling evil to surge forward and be fruitful in winning converts. We know God because Jesus has made him known to us through his life, death and resurrection. We have no excuse for avoiding what we can do to make Him known in our world. Making excuses—and this may sound harsh—means we have made a choice to let evil have its way.

So, while we lament over this tragedy and the condition of our broken world, let us hold on to the unity we have with each other through the Spirit that lives in and through us; and may we recommit to sharing the presence and love of God through word and deed, wherever and whenever the opportunity arises. Let us pray that God will show us, as individuals and as a congregation, new ways needed to make this a reality.

May we not only listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but also follow through, trusting in the empowerment of the Spirit to be the change that makes change happen. Let us never think that we can do nothing to help change the world; because sisters and brothers, that's simply not true, and Jesus says that. Amen.