

SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE

One

John 17:20-26

June 15, 2025

This is Jesus in prayer. A friend of mine calls this the “true Lord’s Prayer,” not only because it is longer than the “Our Father” that we all know well, and it is much longer by far. But it also looks more deeply into the heart of Jesus and into the life of the Triune God.

Jesus’ prayer for us, quite simply, is that we would be one. Just as Jesus and his Father are one, so Jesus wants for us to be one with God and one with one another. It’s a very simple message, but it’s far from easy.

You may be aware that, besides being Father’s Day, this is also Trinity Sunday in the life of the Church. The Trinity is an idea that has baffled simple and brilliant minds for millennia. Legend has it that Augustine was walking along the seashore one day, contemplating the Trinity, and came across a young boy with a seashell that was trying to scoop up the whole sea in that little seashell and pour it into a small hole that he’d dug in the sand. Augustine noticed and said it’s impossible for you to fit the vast and immense sea into such a small hole. To which the boy replied that it is equally impossible to understand the infinite God with the limited capacity of the human mind.

For musician and theologian, Jeremie Begbie, rather than logic or words, he suggests that music can be a better way to understand the Trinity, and therefore to understand the nature of divine love and unity that the Trinity represents. He noticed that “there is big a difference between the way we see the world and the way that we *hear* the world. In the world that we see, you can’t have two objects in the same space in the same time and still see them as different.” For example, “You can’t see red and yellow in the same space, at the same time, and still see them as red and yellow. Either one will hide the other, or they’ll blend together and turn into something different—orange.”

“In the world that we *hear*, things are different. We can hear several notes played at the same time. We can continue to hear each tone of each note distinctly, individually. Notes resonate with and enhance each other.” With a simple chord, you have three notes that you hear in the same space and time as one chord, yet at the same time you can still hear distinctly those three different notes. The notes enhance each other. They color each other. You move one note up just one interval or down one interval, and you go from a major to a minor chord. You change the mood from happy to somber. One chord, three notes—moving, interacting, united, yet distinct.

This prayer of Jesus paints a picture of an intimate relationship of a Father and a Son, bound together by the Spirit of love. A Father who loves his Son, a Son who loves his Father, each of whom want to share that love with more and more people outside of that relationship. Thus, John can say that “God is love, and those who live in love, live in God” (1 John 4:16).

To continue in that music metaphor, living in love means living a life that is in the same key as God’s life. That resonates with it. That harmonizes with it. So what does that look like? How are we to know whether or not we are doing that? How can we hear God, in order to be able to live in step with God’s melody of love in any given situation?

One more lesson that we can take from music is that being one does not mean that we are all the same. Not all the same note. Unity is not uniformity. Just as a chord has three different notes played in key and in unison, each of us is meant to be uniquely ourselves, and to be that in a way that is characterized by and resonates with God’s love.

Scripture gives us many images and descriptions of what it looks like to live in love, perhaps none more well known than Paul's famous chapter on love in 1 Corinthians. Paul tells us that living in love means living in a way that is characterized by patience, by kindness, as opposed to irritability and arrogance, that living in love is living in a way that insists on what is best for others, rather than what is self-serving.

What's interesting in Paul's description of love in this chapter, perhaps the most famous of all chapters on love in scripture, is that it describes love primarily by saying what love is not. The ancient church, it seems, had become tragically well-versed in treating each other in unloving ways, in unifying around the wrong kinds of things. We see this in the things about which they boasted, in the figures or factions of the church that they aligned themselves with against each other, the jockeying about who would get the seats and positions of honor, the arguments about whether certain groups should be allowed in before conforming to certain human religious standards. All of this produced division rather than unity in Christ. Unity existed, but around the wrong things. Enclaves and silos of unity gathered around economic status, around race, around ethnicity, talents and particular gifts over and against other gifts.

I wonder whether and to what extent these kinds of divisions are still with us today that we've inherited. Jesus' deep prayer for us is that these divisions would dissolve as we allow the love of God to live within us and among us.

And as we allow that to happen, as we do this, we become a people through whom God's love may be amplified and resound more and more to the people and places in the world that God loves. As we heard earlier in Isaiah, we are meant to be a "light to the nations," a light that reflects the light of Christ, which "shines in the darkness."

The way we let our light shine is that we live in love with God, within and for one another, by practicing love so that the world God loves may see it in the way we treat each other. And in doing so, they get a taste of the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus Christ.

Theologian and missionary, Darrell Guder, points out that it is the loving character of the church which is at the center of our faithfulness to God's purpose and plans for us. The loving character of the church. "The evidence for the truth and presence of Jesus Christ in the world is the visible, observable love of the community for one another."

If this seems hard, if this seems out of reach—be encouraged. Before this is a command, it is a prayer. Jesus prays this for us, for you. This is Jesus' deep prayer for each of us and all of us. We are one in Christ. And it is Jesus Christ who prays this prayer for us, that we would live in a manner that reflects who we are: children of God, and therefore siblings in Jesus Christ, joined together in the Body of Christ.

I remember a time, several years ago, when our two boys were much smaller than they are now, and they were arguing. I don't remember what they were arguing about. They probably don't either. Maybe a game. Maybe a toy. Maybe someone ate the last cookie. But I do remember the consequence. I remember that Mom and I had discussed something that we had heard, which is that you put your two kids in an undershirt for two minutes until they work it out. So, we did it.

We got one of my big undershirts, when they were very little. Both of them, one shirt, close quarters, two minutes, whether they liked it or not. Before long, anger and irritability began to thaw and melt. Smiles crept up; laughter burst out. First with them, then with us. And it just spread.

This may be a parable of how God's love breaks into our hearts, breaks down the divisions between us. A parable of the Kingdom of God, like a small mustard seed that grows and crowds out all the thorns and the thistles.

It's been said that "Our union with Christ brings a unity in Christ that transcends and transforms all disagreements." His love alone is sufficient to break through impossible barriers of unity. Where there is no way, God makes a way. And so, we join our voices in this great prayer of Jesus. Amen.