

John 17:20-26 (The Living Bible)

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¹ Taylor, K. N. (1997, c1971). *The living Bible, paraphrased*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House.

Jesus, Mediator of Mystery

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: May 23, 2004

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: John 17:20-26

Because this morning's reading from John is a first-person prayer, a personal word from Jesus, I have chosen to present the sermon in a similar fashion. For the next several minutes you will hear from Stephen, a late second century Christian from near Jerusalem. I am not, of course, the Stephen in Acts of the Apostles, who was stoned to death as a Christian martyr. He was alive much earlier than I, but I do think my parents may have named me after him. For when they would read aloud in our home of Stephen, full of faith and the Holy Spirit, they would say, "Nothing greater can be said of a man, Stephen, nothing."

I do not presume to come before you today as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, at least not like Stephen the martyr. But I was a faithful Christian, who came to love the church and Jesus the Christ. And I want to tell you this morning about what it was like. I want to tell you what it was like to be in the church back then. And I want to tell you a little bit about the scripture you read this morning from the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John, oh what a gorgeous and strange Gospel it is, filled with so many things that are hard to quite get your mind around. And especially this morning's piece, where Jesus talks about being one with God.

Now I know that you have heard about being at one with things, especially the universe. In your day you even have jokes about it. You must have heard the one about the Buddhist who went up to the hotdog vendor and said, "Make me one with everything." It's a pretty lame joke, but I like it anyway.

Anyway, a lot of people have heard about being one with everything, but I'm not sure how many people really know what it means. And I hope I can say what it is, but I have to confess that it's more than a little hard to describe. I cannot tell you the number of times we would read the Gospel of John in our home and I would ask my parents, "What does Jesus mean? What does he mean when he says, ²¹My prayer for all of them is that they will be of one heart and mind, just as you and I are, Father—that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you sent me"? I used to ask my parents, "How can one thing be another thing? How can one person be in another person. And how can a person be inside of God? And how can God be inside of another person?"

They used to laugh and say to me, "Stephen, how did so many questions get inside of you? Maybe those questions are filling you up and there's no room for God to get inside you." But they didn't really mean it. I could tell they liked it that I asked questions. But finally they would say, "Stephen, one day it will make sense to you." I have to tell you, though, for a very long time it did not make any sense at all. I would sit out in the yard with two stones in my hand, and I would try everything I could think of to get one of them inside the other, or to squeeze them into one thing. But, of course, it never did work, no matter how hard I tried.

After awhile, I gave up thinking about making things one or how one thing could get

inside another. After awhile, I just forgot about those ideas and played ball and did all the things that young boys do. One day, though, I got into a mess of trouble. An older boy down the street took the stone I was hitting with a stick, and he threw it a long way into the bushes. And then he laughed as hard as he could. I got so mad at him that I wacked him as hard as I could with my stick. Of course, he was bigger than I was, so he grabbed another stick, and he beat me up. It was the first fight I was ever in, but my mother took one look and knew right away that I was in a fight.

My mother washed by cuts and bruises and she put something on them that didn't smell too good, but which she said would make me feel better. Then she sat me down, and she said, "Stephen, please tell me what happened." I told her the whole story, and it made her a little sad, I think, but she didn't get too mad at me. Then she said, "Stephen, when you got mad and hit the boy down the street because he stole your rock, do you think that was what Jesus would have done?" I told her I didn't think so. Then she said, "Well, Stephen, remember when you used to ask what it meant for Jesus or God to be inside of you?" I nodded. She said, "Well, maybe a part of what it means is that you do what Jesus would do."

I said to her, "Geez, Mom, I've seen those bracelets that say WWJD (You know, what would Jesus do?), but is that really all that it means to be one with Jesus?"

She looked at me and said, "No, that's not all there is to it, Stephen, but it's not a bad place to start. And you found out today, didn't you Stephen? that it's not all that easy to do, either."

Over the years it seemed that I had to learn over and over again how hard it was to do what Jesus would do, or what he would have wanted me to do. I remember the time that a popular group of boys said I could be in their group. But they told me I could no longer be friends with some of my other friends, because they were Geeks. I really wanted to be popular, so I said okay. But I knew it wasn't right.

They say that as they grow older, boys don't really grow up. Their toys just bit bigger. Well, it's not just their toys. A lot of choices get bigger, too. I mean, when I think back about getting in a fight over a stone, or trying to be accepted in the popular group, I realize that those things were small olives (We didn't have potatoes near Jerusalem, so we used to say small olives.). Anyway, the stakes became greater and greater. Was I going to turn in my friend to the Romans, or was I going to risk protecting him? Was I going to ruin another person's career so I could get ahead at work? Was I going to charge a fair price for the furniture I made even though I could get more money? Was I going to be honest with my wife when it was so much easier and less stressful to lie. Was I really going to turn my cheek or walk the extra mile or give up my cloak, when I didn't have to?

During all this time, I kept going to our church. In a way, it was confusing. It seemed that at almost every turn the message the world gave was opposite to the message that Jesus gave. There were lots of times that I thought I should just give up on what Jesus said. I mean, what good was he if nothing he said fit into the world.

But I kept on going. Maybe it was remembering my mother's instruction to me when I was a boy. Maybe it was habit. But in truth, I think it was more than that. Because no matter how ridiculous what Jesus said was, somewhere deep inside of me there was this voice, well it wasn't a voice, really, maybe more a realization. That's it, even though what Jesus said was ridiculous, I more and more realized that it actually made sense. Now, of course, what I just said

doesn't make any sense, does it? How can something be ridiculous and make sense at the same time. Well, I think it must be something like what the apostle Paul meant when he said: "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." In any case, I kept going to the church, and this idea, this strange sense of things kept growing within me.

As time went on, something even stranger began to happen. I began to think like the voice, the realization that was within me. How can I explain it? Let's see. Ah, yes. Do you remember in the other Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, when Jesus was tempted in the desert. He was starving and the devil offered him bread? How the devil took him high up on an overlook and waved his hands and said, "All of this can be yours"? I remember thinking what great moral strength Jesus had when he refused the devil. And that was certainly true to some degree. But what I had missed, and what began to come clear to me, was that Jesus was much more in tune with, much more disposed to do the right thing than the wrong thing. For me, in the beginning, the ways of the world were the most obvious and present, and in the background, within me, was a small voice, telling me things weren't as they seemed. But as time went on, the whole thing became reversed. After awhile it suddenly dawned on me, that the voice within me had moved to the front and was much stronger, and the wiles of the world were more and more becoming the background noise. I wouldn't want to sound too bold, but in some sense I began to feel as though I were in tune with the heart and mind of God.

It was not long after this realization dawned on me that I read the passage from John that we are talking about, and I began to understand more fully what Jesus was praying to God about. Jesus knew that the world on its own inclinations does not know God. And Jesus knew that by its own efforts it is almost impossible for the world to come to know God. Without help, the way of the world has too strong a hold on humankind, and it cannot break free.

This is the sense in which I understand that God's son came to save the world. And Jesus knew that the project was just beginning with his first disciples. They were beginning to get the picture. But he was worried, and he prayed to God with these words: ²⁰"I am not praying for these alone but also for the future believers who will come to me because of the testimony of these." Jesus thought of the future generations, and he imagined, I believe, the church. He imagined the continuation, whereby this first generation would continue to grow in their faith, and whereby the testimony of this first generation would go on to the next and the next and the next. For Jesus recognized that without the church, without a vehicle for the testimony and the teaching and the lived celebration of the love of God, the people could not become one with God.

When I reread this passage back then, it suddenly washed over me what had happened. It was just as Jesus had prayed. In the church, with teachings that at first seemed quite at odds with my instincts, day by day, gradually, I came more and more to know the presence of God within me, dare I say it? to more and more feel at one with God. Listen again to the prayer of Jesus, and know that it was meant for you.

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