***Sermon Text for November 17, 2013***

*by Rev, Robert K. Bronkema*

Psalm 133, John 17:20-24

*“That they be one”*

Yesterday something happened which might strike fear in all of the citizens of Pennsylvania. I passed my hunter education test and so for the first time in my life I am cleared to go hunting, should I want. It was a fascinating class, not a single one of us would probably ever be found in a room together, but we were unified, helping each other out, as we prepared and then took the exam.

One of my passions is Christian unity, we’re going to talk about that today. On this Sunday that we are celebrating the birthday of our church, a Sunday that we declare our unity under this institution that we call First Presbyterian, what is it that has held us together over these 181 years?

Well, today, I get to preach on my favorite topic which is the unity of God which is an example for us of the unity that we ought to have as Christians. Our unity must have at its source not a sharing in like events, not fellowship, not even food. That cannot be what makes us one. Only God as seen in his son Jesus Christ can be at the source of our unity.

Today we are going to take a traditional three pronged approach to this topic of Christian unity. First we are going to examine the oneness of God. What does Jesus mean when he says in these verses that God is one? Then having established the oneness of God we are going to establish the necessity for the oneness of the disciples of Jesus Christ, of the church whose center is Jesus Christ. Once we have established the oneness of God, the oneness of the church we will see that this testimony ought to be a magnet for others to come and know and love the one true God.

This entire chapter of John, chapter 17, is a prayer that Jesus prays right after the last Supper and right before the garden of Gethsemane. In fact this is the last Scripture that we are going to look at before Jesus is arrested. This prayer more than anything else is a plea for unity among his disciples and those who would come later and call themselves Christians. It is not often that we hear the words that Jesus uses when he prays. In fact, some people, and you may be one, can’t figure out if Jesus is God, then is he talking to himself? Why not? What’s wrong with talking with yourself. Don’t you ever talk to yourself. I know when I play sports I am constantly cajoling, and coaxing and talking to myself.

But look what he says in this prayer to highlight the oneness of God. Vs. 21, As you, father, are in me and I am in you, vs. 22 they may be one as we are one. Vs. 24 because you loved me from the foundation of the world. One of the keys to understanding how can we say that we believe in a Trinitarian God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and yet say there is only one God is found in these verses.

Genesis 1:1-2 speaks of God’s Spirit or breath moving over the waters, here Jesus is mentioned as being loved before the foundation of the world. In John 1:2 we read that the Son, Jesus was in the beginning with God. Do not understand Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three distinct physical entities but rather three ways in which God is present. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer all intertwined together.

The Bible is filled with this example of the oneness of God. The first commandment states emphatically the Lord your God is one. There is one God. Matthew in the Great Commission states: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Do not let any group dissuade you from the truth that God is one and that God is seen in trinitarian fashion. The oneness of God centers upon the fact that Christ is divine, Jesus Christ was God praying for our sake as a sign of his unity with the Father. They were and shall be one.

Heavenly unity is both the model and the source of the unity of believers. Unity has at its origin, the oneness of God. I John 4:2-3 attests that all those who believe that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. But, we also hear in that same chapter in vs. 21, those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. As we heard in Psalm 133 how good and pleasant when we are able to dwell together in unity. It is the classic Scripture for Christian unity, even if it is found in the Old Testament. In fact, if you turn there now, it is that very unity where God ordains his blessing forevermore. That sounds pretty good so let’s turn to the love that we have to have for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus in his prayer may have touched upon the unity that exists between him and his father, but fundamentally his prayer is for his disciples. The prayer that he has for his disciples is seen at vs. 21. “That they may all be one”. That is Jesus’ prayer for us.

Jesus here is like a concerned parent who just knows that as his children are going to get older they just aren’t going to get along. Doesn’t Jesus know us well? They are going to argue, and fight, and bicker, Oh father, let them be one. Here Jesus is praying for his disciples because already they are arguing over who was the greatest. Peter thought he had the keys to the kingdom, and John, the quiet one was really Jesus’ favorite. Oh let them be one. But not just them, vs. 20 but all those who will believe in him through his disciples.

Who is Jesus talking about here? Who are these future disciples that Jesus is praying for who will be leading the church, be a part of the church. Look around the room. Here in John 17 Jesus is praying specifically for you. In fact Jesus loves us so much that in vs. 24 do you hear what he calls us? In vs. 24 he says Father, I desire that these also, **whom you have given me**. In the Greek this means literally those who are a gift from you. You are a gift from God. You didn’t know that Jesus just called you that here in John but he did. He loves you so much he considers you to be a gift from God. Boy, don’t we need to hear that? Jesus knows that we are a gift from God and he is praying for our unity for a very specific reason: that we may be blessings to others.

That’s the good news. Jesus wants us to be so unified. The bad news is that we really are not on a world scale. When churches do not recognize each other’s baptism and are not able to sit down together at the communion table, that is a sin in the eyes of God and it demands repentance before God. If you look at the world you see so much of our history has been fighting not only over religion, but also Christians against Christians. Brothers and sisters we are brothers and sisters in Christ. Our first name may be Presbyterian, but our last name is Christian because it is the blood of Christ and our baptism in his name that brings us together.

Jesus prays for unity among his disciples. But what is the reason that he gives that this unity is so important? Look at vs. 21 so that the world may believe that you have sent me. Vs. 23 again, so that the world may know that you have sent me and loved them. Our unity is ultimately not just for our own good, but for the good of the kingdom. New souls will come to believe in Christ if Christians get along better with each other.

For some people the fact that we are so fractured is proof to them that God is dead, instead of proof that we are sinful. We look at our bickering and call it sin, some people look at our bickering and mark it down as proof that we follow a false religion. Look at John 13:35, it tells us “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” I don’t care if you can tell your personal salvation story with tears in your eyes, if your life doesn’t reflect your love for those around you, you don’t love Jesus.

Last year around the time of Advent we had the church full for weeks on end, and the primary reason was what? I think it was because you all took it upon yourselves to invite one friend or one family for a service during Advent. Well, it worked, they came and some of you have stayed. But why do we ever stop doing that? Why would we not want to show them a healthy, productive, Spirit-filled environment when they spend their whole days in settings that are usually quite the opposite at work. Can you imagine the joy of being able to come to a place in our society where people actually are nice to each other, smile at each other, care for each other not because of any ulterior motives? Our unity ought to be such a magnet to people that when they experience life here at FPC, they will not only want to come again but invite as many people as possible to the church. That’s what Jesus had in mind here.

People will know you are Christians not because you come to church, not because you are a session member, or even because you sing in the choir, but because every time they talk with you they know you love them, you don’t carry a grudge, you love life. We may love Jesus, but unless we love people, our love of Christ is useless to those around us.

God is one, and God’s oneness makes us one, and our unity and love for each other brings people to confess their faith in Jesus Christ. It is as simple as that. Amen.