

**Sermon: Asking for a Friend**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

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Based on **Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21; John 17:20-26**

Have you ever thought, ‘Man, in a perfect world, everything would be different?’ Different from what we have, anyway. But what would make it perfect? How much effort would be required to make it so? Jesus said that belief, unity, and love ought to do it.

And we say, ‘Really Jesus?’ Knowing what happens next in the story makes me wonder if even he believed in what he was saying, or, actually, praying.

Chapter 17 in John’s Gospel is an extended prayer for his disciples. It begins with a summary of Jesus’ mission and his relationship with God, and then he prays for unity among the disciples, saying, ‘I guarded them, and not one was lost except for the one destined to be lost’ (17:12). Then he goes beyond the disciples and other eyewitnesses and prays on behalf of everyone else who will believe in him from then to now.

But the very next thing that happens in the story is Judas’ betrayal in the Garden. Jesus’ prayer represents his last words spoken before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. The prayed-for unity among the disciples broke down almost immediately. The phrase ‘that they may all be one’ did not necessarily apply to the disciples’ unity, but to their unity with Christ and with God.

That’s an important distinction for us to remember. Was there ever unity in the church? Read Paul’s letters to the church in Corinth. It was like herding cats. And if it weren’t for Peter, the church in Jerusalem might have exploded when they decided to invite Gentiles into the fold. It was their love for Christ and God that kept it all together.

Our own history as a nation shows us that creating unity among groups is not something that we are particularly good at. What we *are* good at is making room for everybody and then getting out of the way.

For example, following the *successful* conclusion of the War of Independence from England, Congress hammered out what became the United States Constitution, which was eventually approved, signed, and ratified by each of the thirteen states. Congress was wise and careful enough to include ten amendments written by James Madison.

These amendments – we call them the Bill of Rights – were designed to protect the people from the government. Among these rights were the right to a fair trial by an impartial jury and with the aid of legal counsel. The Bill of Rights also protected speech, group assembly, and the press. It's almost as if no one trusted anyone else with their unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But the right that caused the most far-reaching and unintended consequences was the first one, the one that says, 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.' Before that amendment came along, everyone just assumed that civic harmony depended on religious conformity. 'One king, one faith, one law,' said Louis XIV. People equated religious diversity with unrest and disturbance. Wanting religious freedom was one reason why Roger Williams got shipped out to Rhode Island. The irony is that he also thought that religion and government should be kept separate.

A few weeks ago, we spoke about how there are more than 1200 church denominations in the United States alone. Many of them originated in the midst of conflict. No surprise there. Conflict often leads to tolerance and mutual respect, if not total acceptance.

But by creating a secular nation, the Founders paved the way for an almost infinite variety of religious expression. And what the first amendment also enabled was a noticeable increase in religious belief and practice, making ours one of the most religious nations in the world, even today.

Someone once said that a failure to live in unity is usually due to a failure to reciprocate. This is true at the human level, and it may also be true of our relationship with God. Jesus prayed for his disciples. Did they ever pray for him?

God is love and God loves us. We know this from Scripture and from our lived experience. We wouldn't be in church if we didn't have at least an inkling of God's love for us. Whenever we feel brokenness in a relationship, we feel pain. It's the same with our relationship with God. If it's not right, we can feel it.

The Bible is filled with themes of loss and restoration; of exile followed by homecoming; the wilderness and the promised land; repentance and forgiveness. One thing leads to another.

Let everyone who is thirsty come. And let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift. If you opened the Bible and began reading at Genesis and worked your way through every book after that, you would end up reading those words here, at the end.

We may never live in complete unity with each other, politically, socially, or economically, not to mention there will always be a stray Yankees fan out there somewhere. But in our greater society, we do a pretty good job of living in peaceful fellowship, for the most part, especially when we come to the Lord's Table.

It was Jesus' hope and prayer that we may all be one with him and with God, as he and God are one. It was his desire, too, that we be where he is and that his love be in us.

Receiving God's grace may be the one greatest longing of the human heart, and perhaps the most difficult gift to accept. But it is freely available to all who want it. So, if a friend were to ask, 'How do I receive God's grace,' you can tell them that to enjoy God's salvation, you just have to want it, and to want to live in unity with God.

Scripture ends with these words: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with *all* the saints.' In that sense, we do live in a perfect world.

Amen.