

“One”
John 17:20-26

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20 *‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.²⁴ Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*

25 *‘Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me.²⁶ I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’*

Well, barring any more extraordinary turns in the weather, I think it’s fairly safe to say that it’s spring now. Not that it wasn’t spring before, but now, thankfully, *it’s feeling* a lot more like spring. So we’ve been outside quite a bit more lately, and that’s been lovely—just so refreshing to be out in the garden weeding again... You know it’s been a long winter when you find yourself on your hands and knees pulling weeds and somehow it’s *refreshing*.

We have a small yard, but it’s not so small that we don’t see some wildlife coming through in bunches. Sparrows, of course, and squirrels, bunnies, ducks, robins, and the occasional mangy fox. The girls these days have been counting the different animals they see on their walks and reporting excitedly when they come home. They’ve been most excited to share when they’ve seen a lot of something, and so I think that this will be the year when they begin to learn some of the more intriguing words in the English language—those collective nouns we use to describe groups of animals. For example, did you know that a group of sparrows is called a host? A host of sparrows is often the gang responsible for consuming most of the seed in our bird feeder.

These collective nouns we use to describe birds and beasts are some of the oldest and most delightful words we have as English speakers. Many of them go back to medieval times and lists of them can be found in some of the very first books printed in English. Often they offer some insight into the nature of the animals or birds they describe. A pride of lions, for example, a party of jays, an ostentation of peacocks, an exultation of larks, a gaggle of geese, a charm of finches, a bed of clams, a school of fish, a cloud of gnats, a parliament of owls, a crash of rhinos... such fun words. [1]

Did you know that we have collective nouns for people too? A blush of boys, a hastiness of cooks, a drunkship of cobblers, a stalk of foresters, a bevy of ladies, a pity of prisoners... [2] This has me wondering about our identity as a church family. I bet we could come up with a nice collective noun for ourselves—something beyond the obvious “a congregation of people” or a “church of Christians.” Like how about a hymnbook of believers? It seems like there ought to be a collective noun set aside particularly for churches, as church people tend to be uniquely suited for their environments. And perhaps that collective noun could change, depending on where they were during the morning: a song of worshippers, a coffee hour of old and new

friends, a parking lot of complainers, or the best I could come up with, a potluck of Presbyterians.

Church folk are an intriguing species in our world—often predictable but strangely adaptable. There was a church in Toronto and it was actually a merger of two separate long-standing churches, Saint James Church and the Bond Street Church. Ages ago, when they came together, the two congregations chose as their name “Saint James Bond Church.” Now, at the time, that seemed like an excellent way to combine the two names. But that was before Ian Fleming came along with his books, and then the James Bond movies.

Suddenly, for the general public, the church’s name no longer conjured up images of two congregations coming together; rather, it brought to mind the daring adventures of a dashing British spy sporting high-tech gadgets, dodging bullets, and drinking vodka martinis, shaken, not stirred. Well, the congregation of Saint James Bond may have been shaken and stirred a bit, but they kept their name. In fact, they embraced the connection and figured it might pique people’s interest. The youth group made 007 T-shirts and wore them with pride. The people of Saint James Bond laughed and enjoyed their good, strange fortune. [3]

Seems like there ought to be a special word for a collection of folks in a church who faithfully engage this challenging and sacred task of holding themselves together with 2000-year-old traditions in a changing culture—of blending and resisting, holding fast and giving in...

Seems like we need a special word to describe ourselves striving to be faithful in a complex, shifting world—a world in which we might feel like we’ve got one foot firmly rooted in Scripture and in our tradition, and where we’re often not sure where to plant the other foot, simply because the culture around is so darn busy, fast-paced, and overscheduled. Seems like we need a word that speaks to that particular aspect of our identity as a church.

It might help to ponder Jesus, long ago, praying for us *and our identity as a church*. Maybe he knew how complex the world would be come, or maybe the world back then was complex enough: political strife, social turmoil, a friend’s betrayal, corrupt religious leaders—it all came to a boil when Jesus entered Jerusalem, and with precious little time left with his disciples, he prayed for them and for those who would follow them in the faith.

He prayed to God, “As you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.” It’s almost like Jesus knew that our *identity* would be a struggle for us—that we would *need help* again, and again, *just figuring out who we are*—that time after time, the church of Jesus Christ would hopefully pause and ask itself, “Is there a word for *us*? A word that sums up who we are and why we’re here and where we’re going?”

Maybe Jesus considered a “gaggle of disciples” or a “skein of apostles.” Maybe he smiled as he wondered about a “fleet of Baptists” or a “raft of Episcopalians.” Or maybe he sensed that the flock would become so undeniably torn and scattered, and so the word he chose in his last, fervent prayer was simply “*ONE*.” *Jesus prayed that we would be ONE.*

There's a famous scene in Hamlet, when the father, Polonius, is saying goodbye to the son, Laertes before Laertes leaves for France, and Polonius is worried about what his son might do there *and who he might become*, and so he imparts this wisdom that has become so famous:

*This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
Farewell, my blessing season this in thee!* [4]

In John's gospel, Jesus' prayer for the disciples and for us is his final blessing to season in us this earnest sense of our identity:

*This above all: to thine own self be true.
You are ONE,
just as God is in me and I am in God,
you must be ONE WITH EACH OTHER,
for it is through your oneness
that the world will know God's love.*

That's a pretty tall order, when you think about it—that we as a global church should strive for *oneness*, knowing that our unity is a decisive factor in the rest of the world deciding whether or not they should even take us seriously, not to mention believing God to begin with.

In discussing this passage, one of the questions I asked in our Wednesday Bible study was, “How does it sit with you to know that Jesus prayed for something he never got?” Jesus prayed that we would be *one*—that his followers and those who would follow them—that we would be *one*, and not just in name only, but *one, just as Jesus and God are one...* It's hard to say whether or not Jesus got a “yes” answer to that prayer. Maybe never.

So what's a potluck of Presbyterians to do with Jesus' 2000-year-old prayer that doesn't look like it's even going to come true? What are we to do with Jesus' request that we live as ONE in a fragmented, overscheduled world where we struggle and strive simply to be one with our families, let alone our church families?

Like most of the best things in life, this doesn't happen all at once. There is no Presbyterian committee or task force that can adequately tackle the conundrum of disunity in a cluttered and divided world. If there were, we'd elect a handful of us right now, order them a Kringle, and set them to work. But no, like most of the most wonderful things in this world, the oneness Jesus prayed for comes in slow tides of intentional human devotion and love.

Here's one story about how it happens... about how it could happen, again and again, in our churches. In the projects of L.A., there's a church that decided to open its doors to homeless immigrants during the week. Every night, homeless and undocumented workers would sleep in the church. On Sundays, the priest and some of the dedicated women of the church would arrive early and do everything they could to eliminate the smell that the men left behind. They'd sprinkle “Love My Carpet” all over the floor and then vacuum like crazy. They'd spray about a can of Lysol all over the room. They lit scented candles and bowls of potpourri in strategic places. They'd burn incense... But the smell persisted and, church being church... people grumbled. They complained.

Finally, in worship one day, the priest decided to face the problem head on. During the sermon, he asked the congregation, “What does the church smell like?” People were mortified. Eye contact ceased. Women started searching their purses for who knows what. “Come on,” the priest said, “What’s it smell like?”

Finally, an old man who never cared what people thought anyway, called out, “Smells like feet!”

“Exactly,” the priest replied. “And *why* does it smell like feet?”

“Because many homeless men slept here last night,” a woman answered.

“Why did we let that happen?” asked the priest.

“It’s what we committed to do,” said someone else.

“And why would we commit to that?” asked the priest.

“...Because it’s what Jesus would do,” someone said.

“Well then,” the priest asked, “what does the church smell like now?”

“It smells like commitment,” one man called out.

“It smells like roses!” another woman shouted, and then everyone in that place laughed and cheered... like a church who knew who they were, and were clear on where they were headed.
[5]

That’s how we become ONE. Or at least it’s the first step—we celebrate being here, being called by God to be here, and finding UNITY in that call... And then, one person at a time, we expand that oneness to include others—the people we serve, the families we pray for, the neighborhoods we know to be in trouble, the Christians with whom we disagree, the nation, the nations, the world.

Jesus prayed a prayer that his followers would be ONE. So far, it doesn’t appear that God has answered that prayer. But maybe it’s not God’s job to answer it. Maybe it’s ours. Amen.

1. Remen, Rachel Naomi, M.D., *My Grandfather’s Blessings*, Riverhead Books, NY, pg. 139.

2. This wonderful list is worth a peek. It’s from the online version of the *Oxford Dictionary*:
<http://oxforddictionaries.com/us/words/what-do-you-call-a-group-of>

3. I'm grateful to the Rev. Lillian Daniel for sharing this story in one of her sermons, though I cannot for the life of me remember which one. You can read Rev. Daniel's sermons on the website for the First Congregational Church of Glen Ellyn where she serves—www.fccge.org

4. Hamlet Act 1, Scene 3

5. Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, Free Press, 2010. The book is wonderful and I commend it to all, though I'm grateful for the way this story was used in a sermon by my friend, Rev. Mark Ramsey, in his sermon, "Leaving the Land of They," preached on May 5, 2013 at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, NC.