

May 24, Easter 7A (John 17:1-11)

## **We can't all be one until we believe that all people matter equally to God.**

by [Martha Spong](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue

The morning of March 13, the sign outside Mechanicsburg Presbyterian Church in south central Pennsylvania was blank. Inside, on a day the office would typically be closed, the pastors and program staff met to make what seemed like a hard decision at the time. They considered all the options, brainstormed possible responses, and then prayed. By noon on that March Friday, their thinking became words that filled the blank slate: “Worship Online—10 a.m. Be kind. Wash your hands.”

Jesus gathers with his disciples on the night we now call Maundy Thursday and teaches them the things he feels they most need to know. Then he lets them hear the prayers he offers to God, a plea for the future of his followers and a claim that just as he and God are one, so can his followers be one.

It is possible the disciples do not realize quite how climactic the moment is, which is not surprising considering the general temperament of the people around Jesus. We may find it both funny and reassuring that even the disciples have an incomplete understanding of who they are following. For them too, the sign is temporarily blank. How will they be the people of God, the followers of Christ, when their circumstances have changed so radically?

Earlier in that March week, I drove to a community in the hills to watch my ninth-grader play his first varsity tennis match. It is the custom that when a match ends, the players shake hands with each other and with both the opposing team's coach and their own. I was already concerned about the coronavirus, had even skipped church the day before rather than have to say no to hugs and handshakes. I cringed when the opposing coach joked with a parent, saying he would indeed shake hands; no substitute would satisfy him. I looked around at the folks cheering the local team, including half a dozen college students home for spring break. They hadn't been told yet not to go back.

The pocket hand sanitizer was ready and waiting for my son after his handshakes at the end of the match. By our team's next match on Thursday, the boys were voluntarily elbow-bumping, teaching the sixtysomething coaches by their example.

We cannot all be one—we cannot realize the prayer of Jesus—unless we believe that all people matter equally to God. To do so requires us to shift our motivation from determining what is good for a narrowly defined “us” toward considering all people as part of the “one.”

Imagine a world in which we live this way all the time—not only when the privileged are endangered but also when only the marginalized are at risk. Then we might inhabit the kind of reality for which Jesus prays with his followers just before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. If we believe God has the power to make it so but does not accomplish that oneness through God's own actions, we must believe God waits for us to respond to this call to action.

By the next Friday in March, non-life-sustaining businesses in my state had been closed down by the governor. The complaints I heard from citizens focused entirely on their particular situations, their individual economies. I confess, I did not feel sympathetic to them. Instead, I scanned the list of businesses compelled to close for an indefinite period and thought about the people who couldn't wash their clothes at home, or the ones who depended on a ride to the grocery store to get food, or the ones who couldn't buy food anyway because the decision to close would save lives but eliminate their modest income.

Discussions were happening in virtual public spaces about how to use our money in this season of material and spiritual strain. Some individuals and groups committed to pay cleaning people, child care providers, clerks, and stadium workers, choices that might hurt a household or a corporate bottom line but help the population overall. We have seen glimmers of goodness in the midst of crisis as mayors issue orders to leave the water turned on whether or not bills are paid or to halt evictions. Italy suspended the payment of mortgages. When our governor told us to stay home, the local library lowered the bar for online usage, telling patrons via email that if they owe less than \$25, they can use all online resources and place holds.

What if we took this kind of collective view in every season, not just in a time of crisis? What if we looked at one another and saw all people as valuable, as part of the oneness Jesus desired for the people around him?

The disciples would go on to found a community of faith modeled on their understanding of the things Jesus taught, providing for the needy and vulnerable in their circle of care, in part by adjusting their own expectations of what they required. From that frame of reference, with that theological stance, they grew a community of faith handed down to us over millennia but buffeted by our attempts to make it more like the world.

We cannot always comprehend the moment in which we find ourselves. We rely on hindsight for perspective. I don't know how things will be when you read this in May. I only know it will take broad individual commitment to the collective good for humankind to be one as God the Creator and God the Christ are one.

How will we respond to Jesus' prayer? Which words will we put on our blank signs to show what matters to us?