

The Abiding Fellowship.

Text: John 17:1-16

Suggested Hymns:

521, 378, 183, 292, 355

1) The fellowship between Christ and His Father

2) The fellowship among the believers themselves

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 17:1-16, ¹ *Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You,* ² *“as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him.* ³ *“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.* ⁴ *“I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.* ⁵ *“And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.*

⁶ *“I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word.* ⁷ *“Now they have known that all things which You have given Me are from You.* ⁸ *“For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me.* ⁹ *“I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours.* ¹⁰ *“And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them.* ¹¹ *“Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are.*

¹² *“While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.* ¹³ *“But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves.* ¹⁴ *“I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.* ¹⁵ *“I do not*

pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ *“They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There is a proverb of the African natives that says: *“A well-worn path must lead to a great king.”* For almost 2,000 years the children of men have been beating a path to Calvary. It is a well-worn path by now, and it leads to a King who is great indeed — greater than any mortal who has ever worn the royal purple. He is the King of Glory, at whose feet all the tribes of men have laid their gifts and whom they have crowned Lord of all.

It is well that we should pause during this Lenten season and tread the path to Calvary together. For those who travel this hallowed pathway together, whether in the flesh or in the spirit, are knit together in a sacred, abiding fellowship. It is a fellowship that knows no barriers of time or distance. It is a fellowship created by Jesus Christ, and centred in Him. In His great high-priestly prayer, on the night before He died, Jesus prayed, ***Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are.***

This fellowship thus appears to be threefold: 1. The fellowship between Christ and His Father; 2. The fellowship between Christ and His people; and 3. The fellowship among the Christians themselves. Let us consider this Abiding Fellowship. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Fellowship Between Christ And His Father

“We are one,” Christ said to His Father, and He meant that in the fullest sense of the term. Time and again during His ministry Jesus had stressed His unity with the Father, as when He told Philip, ***“He who has seen Me has seen the Father.”***¹ That was not empty rhetoric. That was authentic, divine theology.

It is popular in our day to bracket Jesus with the founders of the great world religions; to fling out a statement in which Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, and Christ are all mentioned in the same breath. Simply because a few similarities — in the way of moral precepts — are found between our Lord and certain religious

teachers, people assume that they are derived from the same ethical or spiritual cloth and that there is nothing uniquely divine about Christ.

But Christ says, ***“I and My Father are one.”***² Jesus is not simply another religious teacher. He is religion itself. Every moral reformer, every great philosopher, every preacher of ethics in the history of the world, has pointed to some ideal outside himself. Our Lord did not. He pointed to Himself.

When Socrates was asked by one of his disciples what he should ask of the gods, Socrates told him to *“wait for some greater teacher”* to show him the way to God. When Buddha was asked by his dying follower, Ananda, for help and consolation, he told him: *“Be a lamp unto yourself and a refuge unto yourself.”*

And the same acknowledgment of personal insufficiency, the same recourse to an ethical or moral system, is common to all the world’s great moralists, religionists and philosophers.

But Christ is different. There is no ideal apart from Him. He is the Ideal. There is no way apart from His way, no truth apart from His truth, no life apart from His life. In Him all the various ways and truths and lives find their Center and Source, so that He could say what no man had ever dared to say, ***“Without Me you can do nothing.”***³ You cannot live without Me, for I am Life. You cannot even go to the Father without Me, for I and the Father are one!

In summary we have seen the uniqueness of Christ, the insufficiency of all great teachers, and have come to the conclusion that only Christ is the indispensable one.

2. The Fellowship Between Christ and the Believer

Now, the fellowship of Christ with His Father — a fellowship residing in their essential unity — finds its counterpart in the fellowship of Christ with His believers.

We belong to Christ. He speaks of us to His Father as ***“those whom You have given Me.”*** And belonging to Him, we live to Him. Yes, more, we partake of His own life and submerge ourselves in Him, as St. Paul so beautifully tells his Christians in Colossians 3:3, ***“For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”***

And thus, through our fellowship with Christ, we are made at one with God. And therein lies our supreme worth and position as Christians — brothers and sisters of Christ. This means that Christians are Children of God. That was the purpose of Jesus coming into the world. That is the heritage He has left us, ***“I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”***⁴ And this life He secured for us by His death.

There, in a word, we have the Christian Gospel. But people tell us with a patronising air, *“Haven’t you heard? That Gospel is out of date; it went out with the Victorian era. After all, we’re living in the 21st century, and we need a new interpretation of the Gospel, a message that will fit our day.”*

Now, this tailor-made message, this streamlined Gospel that people today insist upon, must have three qualities: it must be smart, it must be liberal, and it must be modern.

By “smart” the world means that this Gospel must be sophisticated, it must bristle with scientific terms. You must not speak of sin; you must speak of “maladjustments” and “complexes.” You must define religion, not as fellowship with God, but, rather as the god within. You must sound very technical and very profound.

Secondly, our modern world wants a Gospel that is liberal. You must be very free with words like “tolerance,” “social justice,” “co-operation,” and “progress.” Liberal religion becomes nothing more than a sort of glorified sociology. In this way no one will be offended, no one’s pride or self-esteem will be jarred, no one need feel too guilty about his own way of life. A man can call himself a Christian and still be comfortable.

Thirdly, the Gospel for today must be modern. Our passion for progress must be gratified also in the field of religion and in our moral code. See how far we have advanced over our 16th-century forebears in how we travel, and in how we communicate, and in how we equip our homes — and, oh, yes, in how we kill! How unthinkable, then, that we shouldn’t also have outgrown their religious ideas, their naive, unscientific faith! Our religion must be up to date!

However, the world needs Christ’s Gospel. Our Lord was not concerned about any of these factors when He gave His message to the world. He chose the

very methods which the world has always rejected. He did not make His Gospel smart, but simple; not liberal, but transforming; not modern, but eternal.

And that is the message that our groping, over-abundance, disillusioned world needs so desperately to hear. People must be led to see what the gods of their own devising —the gods of Humanism, Philosophy and Science — have done for them — how they have sunk them even deeper into the mire of doubts and despair. They must come to a new awareness of the stark reality of sin and to know that the wages of sin are frozen.

But then there must dawn upon them the wondrous paradox of the grace and love of Christ, who takes all our human notions and turns them upside down, who reverses every human idea of value, and who, in His own divine algebra, makes every human plus a minus and every minus a plus.

For to be reconciled to God by the death of His Son, we cannot be saved by our works and merits. And having in Jesus the redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, faith in Him will save us, no matter how great our sins may be.

On Calvary Jesus showed that the way to power is weakness, and that the way to greatness is service. He showed that the way to wisdom is folly, and that the way to victory is defeat, and that the way to life is death. Yes, He has made of all these minus qualities a divine, eternal plus — through the sign of His cross.

That is the great lesson that we, who belong to His fellowship have learned. That is the power of which we partake through His fellowship, and that is the life we now live in His fellowship. We belong to Him through faith.

3. The Fellowship Among the Believers Themselves

And we who belong to Jesus in the fellowship of His love by that token also belong to one another.

The Apostles' Creed has a glorious name for this fellowship of Christians — *“the communion of saints.”* It is the spiritual interplay of kindred souls, the mutual concord and love that binds together those, and only those, who have washed their robes in the Saviour's blood and who have welcomed Him into their hearts.

In this Lenten season we must be very conscious of this warm and sacred fellowship. For the lines of this fellowship go out from this place to our fellow Christians in all the world, in every walk and circumstance of life. They go out to all those who belong with us to the universal family of God.

The lines of fellowship are not broken by distance. We may have fellow Christians, our family or friends who live a long way away or in the Armed Forces and serving in a distant country.

But we are really not without them; for they are still together with us in the great fellowship of God's children, believing with us, praying with us, worshipping with us, held with us in the same strong arms of God. For in that fellowship of the redeemed there is no separation, and there are no barriers. And so the bonds of faith between us and our distant loved ones hold firm and strong across the miles and keep us together, after all.

Our final thought today is that Christian fellowship is unbroken in life and in death. In the shadow of the cross our Saviour prayed that His Father might keep through His name all those who were His. That prayer has been answered in the lives of the children of God in every age and circumstance. It has been answered in your life and mine, as our very presence here in church today testifies.

It is being answered daily in behalf of many a Christian facing the diverse trials of life — in sickness, in domestic problems, in financial plight, on the battlefield, and in the hour of death. Everywhere, in all the changing scenes of life, God's children are being kept through the power of His name, kept in the fellowship of His love.

And that is a fellowship that bridges the stream of death and joins together in spirit all the children of God. For those on earth and those above "*but one communion make*"⁵ — the eternal family of God, the abiding fellowship of grace, the unbroken circle of those who are kept by His most holy name. May God have us all in His eternal keeping! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ John 14:9

² John 10:30

³ John 15:5

⁴ John 10:10

⁵ Hymn 183