

[Begin the sermon by juggling one ball, then two, and then three (unsuccessfully). Try three balls several times-failing each time.]

I cannot juggle, and I've never been able to juggle. I just wanted to try this as a sermon illustration. There are things in life easy enough to do, as long as they are done separately, not simultaneously.

Some of you may remember when cell phones first started to become popular. You'd see people trying to drive and talk on their cell phones at the same time, and they'd be swerving all over the road and running stop signs. It was terrifying. But then we all got really good at driving and talking on the phone at the same time. Oh, wait...

Or try being the parent of small children and get them ready for church on Sunday morning. You attempt to get yourself ready while putting food into their little mouths without getting too much of the food on their clothes, and you try to get them out the door without one of them assaulting brother or sister. It's hard.

There are plenty of things in life that are challenging enough when done alone, but when attempted simultaneously they seem impossible.

So we come to this prayer of Jesus in the 17th chapter of John's gospel. This prayer is sometimes called the "high priestly" prayer of Jesus, because he is interceding for the church before he is arrested and then crucified. Like last Sunday, Jesus prays for the church to have joy. And like last Sunday, the language of the prayer is poetic and not easy to follow. But it's clear enough that Jesus knows he is leaving and he is praying for the church to be able to do at least three things at once.

"And now I am no longer in the world," he prays, "But they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

Jesus prays for the church's protection, but it's an odd protection, he prays for isn't it? He doesn't pray for the Roman Empire to forget how to torture Christians or for gunmen to stop attacking churches. He does not pray for the church to stop doing ministry in exploding war zones or crocodile-infested jungles. No. Of all things, he prays for God to protect the church's unity. "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

When he has so many other things he could pray for, why does Jesus pray for the church's unity?

Maybe because maintaining the church's unity is so difficult sometimes. After all, each of us is different. We've had different experiences. We hold different opinions. We want different things. We're different. And that's okay. Diversity is wonderful.

But unity is also hard because we're sinners. "I want unity in the church and that means we'll do everything my way." "I want unity in the church, but I'm going to hold onto my hurt or grudge for a few more years." Unity in the church is such a challenge, especially these days, isn't it? It seems impossible.

Yet there is unity in the church. Here we are: Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, wealthy, middle-class, and poor, liberal, moderate, conservative, different races, different sexual orientations, different ages, and different genders, all gathered together. All of these differences, yet we are part of one congregation and we are part of one universal church around the world. In spite of our many differences we are bound together by God, called together by the Living Christ, and sustained in community by the Spirit. It is amazing and it is part of the prayer that Jesus prays.

Jesus also prays for a second thing. "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth," he prays.

In addition to the church's unity, Jesus prays for the church to know and be sanctified in (that is set apart), sanctified in the truth. So the church, the Body of Christ, is to be a body distinctively dedicated to knowing and living the truth.

Well, maybe it seems obvious, but what do we mean by "the truth" anyway? Truth means that which is real, not fantasy, bluster, or lies. Truth means not merely what I wish were so or what might be simply expedient or easy. Truth means that which actually is.

Jesus says God's word "is truth." Thus, truth has reliability about it. Truth has a power to it that illumines right and wrong, and shines light on cruelty and injustice. And this makes truth difficult and blessed at the same time.

In her fine book *Braving The Wilderness* Professor Brené Brown talks about having courage and integrity in a world that tempts us with the lure of trying to please everybody. Trying to live with courage and integrity can be a lonely and scary proposition.

Professor Brown had spoken at several conferences and had gotten excellent responses from her listeners. But at one conference, the organizers asked her not to mention her faith. At another, they asked her to clean up her salty language. Brown says she felt like an outsider, as she has much of her life, not quite fitting in anywhere.

She shared her frustration with her husband, a pediatrician. He said, "You will always belong anywhere you show up as yourself and talk about yourself and your work in a real way...It's the paradox of feeling alone but also strong. Sometimes parents will get angry because I won't prescribe antibiotics for their child. The first thing they say is, 'Every other pediatrician does it. I'll just go to someone else.' It's not easy to hear this, [he said] but I always fall back on the thought. It's okay if I'm alone on this. That's not what I believe is best for this child. Period." (Brené Brown, *Braving The Wilderness*, 26-27.)

Jesus prays for the church to be one and at the same time he prays for the church to be sanctified, to be set apart in the truth. This is hard because the truth often does not unify. The truth actually divides. It declares some things to be real and other things to be false, some things to be uplifting and others to be destructive, some things to be good and other things to be evil.

A few years ago, I remember somebody telling me about a church somewhere that got a new pastor who was getting the church to talk about issues of God's justice and mercy, especially issues that were hot at the time. One of the church members got angry and said to him, "We have gotten along for years by not talking about these things. And we're not going to start talking about these things now."

Okay, that strategy works well for polite dinner parties or casual conversations with other parents at the soccer match, or for pleasant talk beside the swimming pool. "We just don't talk about these things."

But that strategy will not work for the church, because Christ has the audacity to pray this disturbing prayer for the church, "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."

So we offer Sunday school classes for all ages to learn not only the content of the Bible but how to interpret and apply the Bible in the 21st century and to help our children learn that too. We have book studies on the Christian faith, or social issues, or books of the Bible.

And as followers of Christ we actually try to get the facts about what is happening in the world. What's the truth about a Christian response to environmental justice or immigration reform or programs that seek to alleviate poverty, for example. We look at multiple sources and we're suspicious of news sources that are little more than propaganda. Discerning truth and trying to follow the truth is a challenge, but it's also what Christ prays for us

"So that they may be one, as we are one...Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." Bring us together, but immerse us in the truth that naturally enlightens and divides. This seems about as likely as my juggling.

And then Jesus throws a third ball up into the air. He prays, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

Maybe being sent comes last because we need to be together and we need to be in the truth and seeking the truth before we are sent to do God's ministry. Now Jesus prays for the church to be sent into the world, just as he was sent into the world.

And why was Jesus sent into the world? We know the answer, don't we? We go all the way back to chapter three in John's gospel and read, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Jesus was sent into the world not to punish the world but to save it. And the church is sent into the world not to damage the world, but to be part of Christ's saving of the world. We are imperfect for sure, yet we are still part of Christ's saving work in the world.

So in a few weeks, some of us will head to East Greensboro to continue helping with the tornado relief there. Others of us will give money or supplies for the relief. Others will do all three.

On Wednesday evening, José and Jan Feliciano, two of the missionaries we support in Mexico, spoke briefly to a few members of the Mission Committee and then to our Presbyterian Women gathered for their spring salad supper. These missionaries are educating future pastors, running Vacation Bible Schools, teaching youth and young adults, building and repairing churches, and so on. One thing they made sure to mention to the Mission Committee was that in a traditionally patriarchal culture they're also pushing boundaries as they emphasize the leadership of women. This is a good thing, isn't it? Just as the Mission Committee's work helping to resettle persecuted refugees is a good thing too. And so is the college scholarship the committee has established for young people in our sister village in Nicaragua.

Recently, our Justice and Peacemaking Committee has been active not just in reaching out in advocacy for the hungry through our offering of 168 letters to elected representatives but also in representing GPPC in environmental justice and LGBT justice efforts. And once again, the joint picnic we enjoyed with our friends from the Islamic Center of Greensboro is not an occasion for either faith to try to convert the other. Rather in an age filled with mistrust, name-calling, and hatred, our friendship is a sign of God's love and peace.

The Guilford Park Guys, our program that works with boys living in transitional housing, has recently expanded as mentors from North Carolina A&T are now spending time with the guys. At least two things are going to happen. First, the boys are being inspired by the powerful examples they are encountering. Second, after they graduate from high school, they will have connections with successful male role models as they make life decisions, such as continuing their education or joining the military or getting a job. How exciting is that?

"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

Guilford Park is a diverse church being sent by Christ into the world to serve in so many different ways. Some of our members are being sent solely through the prayers they offer and the money they give. Others are very much about "hands on" mission work. Others are called to advocacy and education. Each of us is called in at least one way. How are you being called? How might God be calling you to continue your ministry or expand it or even to start something new? Pray about it and let me know if I can help you get connected or started.

God's church juggles a seeming impossibility: unity, truth, and being sent. And left to ourselves it would be impossible. But we are not left to ourselves. Christ prays for us "that they would be one, as we are one," "that they would be sanctified in the truth," and "so I have sent them into the world." Christ

prays for us and God empowers us to do the impossible.

So keep juggling. Unity, truth, and being sent. Keep juggling. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal