

Sunday – June 5, 2011
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon – **Jesus Prays for Us**

St. Matthias UMC
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Scripture: John 17:1-11

Let's put this passage in context. It's at the Last Supper - the night Jesus would be betrayed; he'd be dead and buried in less than 24 hours. He washes the disciples' feet, sends Judas out, gives them the commandment to love one another, tries to explain to them that this is the end of his earthly life, his earthly relationship with them, and simply tries to prepare them for his absence from them while promising that he wouldn't leave them orphaned.

This is a lot for the disciples to take in. Then, the last thing he does with them before going to the Garden of Gethsemane to be arrested, is pray for them. Our lesson is the beginning of the prayer.

He is praying not just for the individuals in the room with him. He is praying for them and for all who would become his followers through them. That would be the Church. His prayer is for the whole community of faith throughout the ages, for all the congregations all over the world. For St. Matthias.

It matters that you are part of a congregation. It matters that you participate in the life of that congregation. God is not stupid. He knows if your name is on the roll, but you live as though it isn't. He is not impressed by church membership. That much is a given, a starting point, not an accomplishment.

If you were to meet Jesus at the pearly gates, and he would ask you why you should be allowed into heaven, and you said, "I am a member of your Church," he would not consider that a reason to let you in. Church membership is not some magic amulet you can wave around so you can get a set of rights and privileges.

Next week, there will be eight young people who join this church after completing the confirmation process. They will vow to support their church with their prayers, presence, gifts and service. Everyone who joins a UMC does this. And yet, over half of them will fall away. They will not keep the vows, even if they insist on keeping their name on the church roll. Or they will quit altogether. Evidently, they are not impressed with their own vows,

which they made to God in front of the Church.

You can see why we need Jesus to pray for us. We are weak. We make promises to God we just don't keep. And if we find ourselves drifting away, being members in name only, this prayer is not for us.

I'm not saying Jesus doesn't love inactive church members, or people who never have anything to do with a church. I'm just saying that the prayer in John 17 does not apply to them. This prayer is for the Church, the active, living, growing community of faith that is engaged in worship and service, mission and evangelism, education and fellowship and generosity.

Being a member of a congregation is important. Being an active member, a contributing member, a serving member, is even more important. I don't have figures in mind to determine who is active and who is inactive. I don't know what percentage of your income you should give, although Jesus says a tithe (10%) is a beginning. I don't know how many Sundays per year are the minimum or how many hours of service or participation in Sunday School, UMW, UMM, UMYF.

But, what I do know is that Jesus knows where your heart is. If you are wondering what is the minimum level of church participation is to keep you in this prayer, Jesus is not impressed.

Jesus wants us to do the best we can to be as active as we can be as members of his Church. He wants commitment, a willingness to work our lives around Church, instead of the other way around. We do not want Jesus to look at our level of church participation and wonder, "Is that what I died for?"

Next Sunday, we'll take in our confirmands, honor our graduates, and celebrate Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. Invite all the inactive church members you can think of. Next Sunday will be a celebration of what it means to be the Church, to be committed to Christ, to being part of the fellowship. Maybe we can help Jesus knock something loose inside them, so they remember back to when they thought being an active part of this church seemed like a good idea.