



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

**“ONE IS THE LOVELIEST NUMBER”**

**Scripture Lesson: Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26**

*This sermon was preached by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, May 8, 2016  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Okay, it is time to let you in on a little secret. I know that I will feel better once this is out in the open. Some of you might have suspected it. I was on the math team in high school. I was a mathlete. Yes, I took math tests for fun. My love for math led me to Clemson University, where I received a Civil Engineering degree. As a pastor, I still love working with numbers and using a calculator. I put together the youth ministry budget each year using a four page Excel spreadsheet. The technology behind our youth mission auction fundraiser held this past week was Google spreadsheets. I think numbers are fun.

We use a lot of numbers in the church. 369 people attended worship last Sunday. Thirty-six people were baptized in 2015. Fifty-two youth and adults are serving on mission teams to Chicago and the Thornwell Home for Children this summer. The ushers are not the only people who are counting this morning. Some people are using their watches to measure the length of this sermon.

And the Bible is full of numbers. God created the heavens and the earth in six days and on the seventh day God rested. For forty years the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days. Jesus chose twelve disciples. Jesus fed 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish. On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. And our lectionary gospel lesson for today includes the number one four times.

It is Maundy Thursday at this point in John's gospel. Jesus has washed the disciples' feet, predicted his betrayal, shared the new commandment, and promised the Holy Spirit. And just before his arrest, Jesus prays for his disciples. While Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus' act of prayer in each of their gospels, only John's gospel includes "Jesus' high priestly prayer" in which Jesus intercedes for the disciples and all believers. The disciples overhear Jesus as he prays to God the Father on their behalf.

A few weeks ago I went to the doctor's office for a checkup. At the end of the visit, my doctor prayed for me as he has done before. It was in those moments that I realized that I feel most comfortable praying for someone else. While it was powerful being prayed for, I also felt a little vulnerable. I was not in control of the prayer. All I could do was receive the prayers of another on my behalf.

I wonder if those first disciples felt the same way as they overheard Jesus' prayer for them, that they might be one. Other New Testament texts can help us understand what Jesus is saying here. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus quotes Genesis by saying, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."<sup>1</sup> In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he writes, "[Jesus] has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace."<sup>2</sup> The oneness that Jesus is praying for on behalf of his disciples is reflected in the covenant of marriage and the coming together of the Gentiles and Jews into one new humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 19:5 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 2:15

*Presbyterian Outlook* Editor Jill Duffield explains, “This coming together of two separate entities is the kind of oneness Jesus prays for in John.”<sup>3</sup>

I imagine that those first disciples did not feel like one on the night that Jesus was betrayed. Judas was planning the betrayal. I doubt that the others had forgotten that James and John had pulled Jesus aside and asked for positions of honor. This group of disciples was far from being one, and Jesus knew it. So he prayed for them to be one: that past hurt and divisions be healed. He prayed for them to be one, and Paul echoes this prayer in his letter to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> He prayed for them to be one: that their relationships with one another might reflect the oneness of his own relationship with the Father.

But Jesus’ prayer is not just for those first disciples. He prays to the Father, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus is also praying on our behalf, that we might experience oneness with one another. Jesus is praying that all Christians everywhere might experience the oneness that he has with the Father.

Unfortunately, we do not have to look past our sanctuary door to realize how difficult this is. In many ways we are a diverse church of 1400 members. We have children as young as a few weeks old and an adult who is 100. We call many places home from downtown Charleston, to Summerville, to Kiawah, and beyond. Our middle school and high school youth go to at least twenty-four different schools. We have different gifts to share and we express our faith in God in different ways. We are Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and more. Some of us like singing the old hymns of the church and others enjoy more contemporary praise songs. We sometimes disagree. And while our differences threaten to force us apart, Jesus is praying that we might be one. Borrowing an image from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is trying to gather us together like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings. On this Mother’s Day we are reminded how hard the mothers in our lives often work to keep our families together.

We see the oneness that Jesus is praying for in today’s lectionary reading from Acts, as the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings together the most unlikely of people. Paul, a free man, casts out in the name of Jesus Christ an unholy spirit who has been residing in a slave girl. Her owners are not pleased, and they convince the Roman authorities to throw Paul and Silas, two Jews, into jail. Later after Paul and Silas are locked up, while they are praying and singing hymns to God, an earthquake unfastens their chains and opens the prison doors, but the prisoners do not flee. The jailor awakes and thinking that the captives have escaped he considers killing himself. However, Paul assures him that no one has left. Having just experienced his life flash before his eyes, the jailor asks Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved. That very night through faith in Christ, the jailor and his household are saved and baptized. It is quite an amazing story. The human divisions of slave versus free, Jew versus Roman, and captive versus captor are crossed by the power of Jesus Christ.

Given all of our diversity, oneness in the church seems difficult, if not impossible, so when it happens we can be confident that it is the work of God in Jesus Christ. To be clear, the oneness that Jesus is praying for is not to end diversity or compel uniformity, but instead the coming together of distinct parts into a unified whole. Scripture and the confessions even acknowledge the diversity of the Triune God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The oneness that Jesus is praying for is that we may be able to overcome divisiveness and

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<sup>3</sup> Jill Duffield, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, “Looking into the Lectionary: Seventh Sunday of Easter (May 8)” (5/2/2016).

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 3:28

<sup>5</sup> John 17:20-21a

bitterness. Our unity in Christ is not something we can create; it is only possible through the oneness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who created us in God's image, to be like God. What a blessing it is to know that Jesus is praying that we might be one.

And I believe that God is creating oneness right here and right now at First (Scots) in the midst of all of our diversity. Our Building Bridges Initiative has given us space to share stories of when our church has been at its best and our hopes for our future together. These conversations have helped us focus on what unites us and identify the core values that we share as a congregation. While this process is not complete, it is easy to see that our church greatly values traditional worship and music, Christian education and youth ministry, and mission and outreach along with other ministries. One of the other possible core values that has emerged from these conversations has a working title of "Respectful of Diversity and United in Purpose." Our Building Bridges conversations have shown that our congregation values our diversity along with our unity in Christ. What a powerful affirmation of the work of Jesus Christ in our midst!

I have seen the oneness that God is creating here at First (Scots) when our youth and Presbyterian Women host a special dinner each year for the eldest members of our congregation. I have seen the oneness that God is creating here at First (Scots) when church members with differing political views roll up their sleeves and work side by side to build a Habitat for Humanity home for a family in our community. I have seen the oneness that God is creating here at First (Scots) when elders who voted differently at a session meeting serve one another communion during Sunday worship. I have seen the oneness that God is creating here at First (Scots) when people who have spoken very passionately to our session about divisive topics from very different points of view, are elected to serve together on our Pastor Nominating Committee. I have seen the oneness that God is creating here at First (Scots).

Not long after I was called to serve as your Associate Pastor, I realized that because our youth go to many different schools, it was going to be an added challenge to build a sense of community within our youth group. Sometimes youth are hesitant to attend youth group or participate in a church activity unless someone that they know from their school is also attending. Sometimes we adults do the same thing! To help build a sense of community we often divide up the larger youth group into smaller groups that are created randomly for various activities. Such was the case on a mission trip to Asheville in 2012 as we divided up into work groups during the day and small groups each night for reflection. However, when our group went rafting, I did something shocking. I allowed the youth to choose their groups. Five of the girls chose to raft together and I joined them as their chaperone along with a river guide. As we were making our way down the river, one of the girls suddenly stopped paddling and exclaimed, "You know what? All five of us go to different schools." At that moment I knew that our ministry with youth would never be the same. I have seen the oneness that God is creating here at First (Scots).

It is a little scary isn't it? Unlike an algebraic equation that we can solve with a little time and effort, our oneness in Christ is out of our control. Our unity is not something that we can create ourselves. Only God can do it. But given our diversity, how comforting it is to know that Jesus is praying that we might be one. And how exciting it is when we see the oneness that God is creating in our midst. For there is one body and one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:4-6