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in•ter•cede: The Church

John 17

Happy New Year! I have some wonderful news. As of this weekend, Ellis White has completed the last of his ordination exams to become a pastor in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church! Assuming he passes those exams... and who would bet against him?! Ellis will be examined by the presbytery in three weeks. And on February 12, he will be ordained as our new Assistant Pastor for Evangelism. This is a monumental accomplishment and Ellis (and Rachel, because he could not have done this without her). Both deserve our hearty congratulations! Huzzah!

For the past four months we have been focused on prayer. We started with a study of the Lord's Prayer. Then for Advent, we looked at prayers in the darkness of the Old Testament and in light of the birth of Jesus.

And now, after months of studying prayer, it is time for us—wait for it—to pray... to pray together as an entire church body. So today, we begin a new series called "Intercede." Intercede means "to plead with someone in authority on behalf of someone else." And that's exactly what we are going to do as a congregation. Each week we are going to intercede—to plead together with the Lord—on behalf of a specific group of people.

During inauguration week, we will pray for our nation and its leaders. The next week we will pray for our city, which will include an afternoon prayer walk around Gig Harbor. In other weeks we will pray for marriages, for families, for unbelievers, for missionaries, and we will conclude by praying for our enemies. Each week we will study an appropriate text and provide some helps and reminders that will keep us on track as we learn to intercede together. Are you willing to give this a try?

This week, we begin by praying for the Church. When we say "church" we often think of a building like this one, but this is not the church. This is the church... people... all of God's people! And not just the little "c" church; not just Chapel Hill. But rather what we call the big "C" Church—the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. Your brothers and sisters in Jesus around the world. We are going to pray for them this week.

Our text comes from the Lord's Prayer. And I'm not talking about "Our Father, who art in heaven..." We call that the Lord's Prayer, I know, but it really isn't the Lord's

Prayer. That is our prayer. That is how Jesus taught us to pray. If you really want to listen to the Lord's Prayer—the prayer of Lord Jesus—turn with me to John 17.

Studying John 17 is like eating rib eye steak. It is meaty and requires you to chew carefully in order to digest it. So we are going to look at just one small juicy section of the near the end...where Jesus prays for us! Believers who had not even been born yet. I want you to listen for the specific thing Jesus prays for us, his big "C" Church. It is so important to him; he repeats himself three times! And to set the context, he has just prayed for his 11 disciples. Now listen as Jesus prays for you and me!

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. John 17: 20-23.

Of all the things Jesus might have asked the Father to do for his Church, what is the specific thing he prayed? "...that they may all be one..." He doesn't pray for our success. He doesn't pray for our power. He doesn't pray for our protection. He doesn't even pray for our love, even though he commanded his disciples earlier to "love one another." No, Jesus asks his Heavenly Father to "make us one." He does it three times; in fact, the last time he prays that God would make us "perfectly one"! Unity. What kind of unity does he ask for? The unity that exists within the Trinity; the unity that has existed for all of eternity between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And WHY does Jesus pray for unity? "...that the world may believe that you have sent me."

That is the simple formula of Jesus' prayer for us. That we would be one, like the Trinity, as a witness to the world. That we would be one, like the Trinity, as a witness to the world. What matters most to Jesus? That we would be one!

How many of you have ever lived through a church split? There are few things more painful than watching God's people chew each other up. This past week alone, I have been in conversations with two different churches in conflict. Their pastors are being forced out by a few—others are furious about it and still others have just thrown up their hands and left... abandoned ship. They are sick of it all; it is too painful. It has been said that the Church is the only Army that shoots its wounded. Unbelievers watch us fighting with each other, and it just disgusts them. Why would they want to follow the Prince of Peace when this is how His people brutalize each other?

If you have never gone through a church fight, you have no idea how blessed you are to be a part of a congregation that is united, where the elders are of one mind,

where we really act as if we love and care for each other. A Sweetheart Church... savor it. Treasure it! It is a gift... an answer to Jesus' prayer that we may be one. But Jesus wasn't praying just for one congregation. He prayed that "all may be one." That all those who call him "Lord"—all around the world—would be one. So, how are we doing with that? When the world looks at the big "C" Christian Church, is it so astounded by our unity that it cannot help believing in Jesus?

This coming October 31, is an historic day and not because it's Halloween. Do you know what happened on that day 500 years ago? Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 discussion topics on the local church door—things he felt the Roman Catholic Church needed to work on—and it set off a firestorm. It was the beginning of what we know as the Protestant Reformation. We are a part of that church split. It is why we meet here and St. Nick's meets down the street!

But 500 years before that, in 1054, another huge split occurred between the western Christian church (the Latin half) and the eastern church (the Greek half.) It was called the Great Schism. Each side viewed the other as heretics. In fact, the last time the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox leaders took communion together was in 1453 in the city of Constantinople in the Church of Hagia Sophia, just before the invading Ottoman Turks broke through the city walls and slaughtered them.

What a shame that it took such calamity to bring God's people together around the Lord's Supper! And what a shame that to this day, around the world, brothers and sisters in Christ still live in suspicion and judgment of each other!

I remember a time when I led a group to Israel. One of our stops was a Greek Orthodox Church in the village of Cana. Cana was where Jesus performed his first miracle, the changing of water into wine at a wedding. As we stood in the chapel, I read that story and then led the couples in a renewal of their marriage vows. It was a very intimate and holy moment, until the local priest came running in from the back of the chapel, shouting a language I did not understand and waving his finger at me. We stopped the ceremony and left. Our guide told us that because we were not Greek Orthodox, we were not welcome to worship in that building; only to sightsee.

Two days later, we stood on Mt. Tabor, the site of the transfiguration of Jesus. On top of the mountain sits a beautiful Roman Catholic church with incredible acoustics. I love to read the story of the Transfiguration under the arch in the sanctuary and then sing together. But when we arrived a mass was in progress. I told everyone to stand quietly and wait. Maybe we could sneak down after the service was over. So we stood there; we sang with them when we recognized the songs, we prayed the Lord's Prayer with them...we quietly joined them in worship.

Then, as the priest prepared to serve communion, he did something remarkable: he looked up at me and gestured to us with his hand. I hesitated. I know that Catholic

priests aren't supposed to serve communion to non-Catholics. It was pretty obvious we were non-Catholics. And yet, as I hesitated, he gestured more vigorously. So, finally, I led the way down, with the rest of our folks behind me, and we received communion from this gracious Catholic priest on the top of Mt. Tabor.

The two experiences could not have stood in starker contrast. In Cana one thing, on Mt. Tabor, it was the opposite. Which do you think best represents the oneness that Jesus prayed for?

So, how do we move from that to this? One way is to focus on that which we hold in common; the core things we believe together. In a moment, we will recite the Nicene Creed—a statement of faith written in 325! I will never forget standing next to a lake in Turkey at the site of ancient Nicaea, pronouncing these words together and renewing our baptismal vows with waters from that ancient site. When we say these words, we are declaring that, yes, there are many things about which we disagree. But in these core convictions, we are united. We are one.

Here's another way we can live out our oneness: We pray for other believers... pray for other churches. And I'll be honest with you here; this can be hard for some pastors, because we tend to view other churches as competition! I know that has been true in my ministry. Instead of celebrating what God is doing at St. John's or Harbor Christian Center or Believers' Fellowship or Harbor Covenant, there have been times when I viewed them as competitors. When people left Chapel Hill to go somewhere else, instead of celebrating that they found another church home, I was angry because we had lost someone to "another team."

I am not proud of those feelings; in fact, I am ashamed of them. Which is one of the reasons you find Gig Harbor churches mentioned by name on the back of the bulletin every week. So that we can pray for them! Pray for their success! Pray that God would grow their numbers! I figure if the Devil wants to sow seeds of dissent—if he wants to make me jealous and possessive of God's children—the best way to combat that is to pray that other churches flourish.

So, this week, I invite us as a congregation to intercede for the big "C" Church. And we are going to start with the churches right around us. Later on, we will pray for the world-wide church, but if we can't even care for, pull for, pray for HCC and St. John's and St. Nick's and Believers (those whom we know) how will we ever care for, pull for, pray for a Greek Orthodox congregation or Thai congregation half way around the world?

So we start here. Will you join me in praying for the churches of our community? Open your bulletin. Under my letter you will find a box. Think about a friend that goes to a different church. Write down that name. Then, during our renewal of vows, text that person and ask how you can pray for their church. Then pray! And as you walk out, get one of these ugly green stickers from an usher. Stick it on your steering wheel to remind you that every time you drive by a church this week, pray

for them! And finally, watch for an e-bulletin tomorrow. We will provide you with the specific prayer requests from 12 pastors in our community. You've seen those on the screen throughout the service. Please, pray for them.

Jesus longs for his church to be one. We who were baptized in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are to live in unity so that the world might look at us and believe in Jesus. As we remember our baptism, let us celebrate the unity we share with billions of believers around the world and down through the ages as we recite the Nicene Creed.

Grace EPC (Pastor Ed Longabaugh)	Our prayer: for a greater ability and desire to connect with our community on the Key Peninsula.
GH Nazarene (Keegan Lenker)	Prayer that our church community runs to the places of chaos to experience deeper discipleship there. We're working toward seeing a need and meeting that need and in turn discovering Jesus there.
Burley Bible Church (Pastor Paul Burns)	Pray that Burley Bible Church would be like a shining city on a hill that cannot be hidden during the dark days in which we live.
WayPoint Church (Pastor Tim Stobbe)	Our biggest request: That we would follow God's direction to most effectively make disciples on the Key Peninsula.
Peninsula Baptist Church (Pastor Paul Jones)	Specific areas for prayer: -for greater clarity, wisdom, and vision for the ministry the LORD has prepared for us -for the strengthening of the body of Christ throughout Gig Harbor, in Spirit and Body -for the love of Jesus Christ to be poured out upon us, and through us, to transform the lives of others in our community
Harbor Covenant (Michael White, Senior Pastor)	For Harbor Covenant: "Pray that God will continue to change our hearts so that we will not not simply focus on our own personal preferences but have a passion for reaching lost people."
Discovery Baptist (Mark Suko, Senior Pastor)	We here at Discovery would ask for opportunity and word to be given to make known the mystery of the gospel, as Ephesians 6:19 says.
Peninsula Christian Fellowship (Kurt Mach, Senior Pastor)	Please pray that our corporate love and passion for God grows stronger.

One Hope Church (Peter Churness, Lead Pastor)	Pray that we keep our vision for reaching the unchurched in our community and keep our focus on Jesus as our ONE HOPE.
Harbor Christian Center (Pastor Gino Grunberg)	Please pray that our hearts would continue to be enlarged and our eyes opened so that we may care for the underserved, those on the margins, the elderly, the immigrant, the sick and disenfranchised and the many people in our community who don't think or know that they matter to God.
North Mason Bible Church (Jim Porter, Senior Pastor)	I am asking the Lord to increase our heart and passion to effectively share the Gospel in our communities.
Agnus Dei Lutheran Church (Pastor Seth Novak)	At this time, we are feeling more gratitude than need. We would simply ask God to continue to call and raise up leaders in all areas of the church.

Cambodia: Less than 2% of Cambodians are Christians. Organizations like our partner Cambodian Hope are helping to change that by sharing the gospel and planting churches. CHO has planted over 60 village churches. The prayer is that the Cambodian church would continue to grow, that these 2% of Christians would be a witness to their families, neighbors and friends. Church leaders in Poipet are hungry for training. Our team will come alongside some of this training to enrich and grow the Cambodian church.

Thailand: The church in Laytongku is still in it's infancy. In fact, the first church building in Laytongku will be dedicated shortly after our team's visit. In Laytongku, villagers feel closely tied to the spirit world and fear anything that might make the spirits angry. The name of Jesus brings freedom from these spirits. Our prayer is that this new church on the hill in Laytongku would be a beacon of light in the darkness, that the Talako would be drawn to the freedom and grace that comes with knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord.

ASU: I think with this one, you should focus on praying for students who left the church when they went to college. I know that this is something that is near to many parent's hearts. But studies show that when college students intersect with campus ministries, they are more likely to return to the church. The ASU team, RZIM, and other campus ministries provide a chance for students to insect with the Gospel. They will challenge students at ASU to ask those questions about faith they are dying to ask. Our prayer is that we would see students, not just at ASU, but at campuses around the country return to faith through the work of campus ministries.