

“To be or not to be, that is the question.” “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo.” “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.” “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players.” “Now is the winter of our discontent.”

All of these quotes have one thing in common and most of you probably know what it is. They were all written by William Shakespeare. Specifically, they are each the first line to a soliloquy. Now, that is a word you may not know, so I'll explain.

A soliloquy is when an actor in a play gives a lengthy speech. But it's not just any speech, because it's a speech that is not given to another character in the play. No, it's a speech given to the audience. Given so that the audience can hear what the character is thinking. What he's saying to himself. What's going through his own mind.

Soliloquy's are important in theater. They give a glimpse into the inner thoughts and emotions of a character that we wouldn't otherwise get. Shakespeare was a master of the soliloquy. He knew exactly how to write them so that we understood each character better. Understood their motivations and intentions.

Today in our Gospel reading, we have a soliloquy of sorts given to us by Jesus. He has gathered his disciples in the upper room for the Passover. He's washed their feet, given them His Last Supper, and predicted both Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial. In a few minutes they will leave and go to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus will be arrested.

But before they leave, he has a few final things to say. Important teachings to give them about their ministry and the work of the Holy Spirit. And then, once all that is said, he stops and he lifts his eyes toward heaven and he prays.

And at that point, what we read is no longer Jesus teaching his disciples or giving them a sermon. No, this is Jesus talking to his Father. This is God talking to God. Talking to himself, in a sense. This is a soliloquy. And yet, like a Shakespearean soliloquy, it's meant for our benefit. We're supposed to listen in. Because we are the audience.

This wasn't just spoken and written down for Jesus' disciples gathered around him at that moment. Jesus says at the very beginning of this passage: *“I do not ask for these only [these eleven disciples at the table with him], but also for those who will believe in me through their word.”* That's us. We are the ones who believe in Jesus through the message of the apostles. He's talking about you and me.

These are important words. Martin Luther loved this chapter of the Bible. It might have been one of his very favorite. In fact, he once wrote that he wished every Bible had this paragraph written in gold letters, so that we knew just how precious it was. Because Jesus is thinking about you. He is concerned about you. He is praying for you. That's something worth reading.

And it's not just one request that Jesus makes for us. This one little paragraph is packed with so much. It really is an amazing opportunity to delve into the mind of Christ and what he wants for his church.

And the first thing we learn is right there in that first statement that I just read to you. Jesus prays that we might believe through the word of his apostles. That's what the Bible is there for. It's not just a collection of random sayings and colorful stories.

It is a gift from Jesus given through his first apostles so that we might believe in him. So that we might have God's Word passed down to us through their words. Jesus prays that you might know the truth, His truth, through the true words of those he called to be his disciples.

Which is something we acknowledge regularly in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one holy Christian and Apostolic Church.” We have an apostolic church. A church passed down to us by the Apostles. But passing the church down to us wasn't a work that they performed. No, we put that acknowledgement in the Creed because it was an act of God. A work of the Holy Spirit.

So when the Apostles passed down the Word of God to the Church it was a fulfillment of Jesus' prayer. It was also a fulfillment of his prayer that His Word spread to all the world. He created apostles and he created a Church “so that the world may believe.”

And here we see something that's a little interesting. Jesus doesn't make that strong of a distinction between the Apostles, His Church, and the World. Because he knows that the Word doesn't stay in one place. It's not static. It's living and active and accomplishing God's purposes.

So if he gives his word to the Apostles, then it will be shared to generations to come. And if he gives his word to generations to come, then it will be shared with the whole world. And so in exactly one sentence, Jesus' prayer has exploded from being for eleven men to being for the entire world. Because that is exactly what Jesus intends for His Word.

And yet, we also must recognize that there's an opposing force to Jesus' prayer: sin. Sin gets in the way of Jesus' prayer for us. Sin gets in the way of God's Word being passed down from one generation to the next. Sin gets in the way of the church carrying out its calling to share that Word with the whole world.

And, possibly most of all, sin gets in the way of the church being unified in that task. Because that was also Jesus' prayer: “*that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.*” Jesus prays for a unity in the church that simply does not exist yet. And, really, hasn't ever existed, since the time of the Apostles.

Why? Well, whenever there's doctrinal, theological division in the church, it usually comes down to one group rejecting God's Word in favor of their own opinion. If we were all perfectly aligned with God's Word, then there would be no division. We would be as united with each other and with Jesus as Jesus is with the Father. But when somebody strays from the Word, then division happens.

Over the years, there have been a great many Roman Catholics who have accused Martin Luther of promoting division. Of inciting in the reformation the multitude of denominations that we see today. I understand why they say that, but it's not true.

Because Martin Luther didn't depart from God's Word. The Roman Catholic Church did. Luther stuck to the Word and pleaded with Rome to do so as well. But they refused. So even though it was Luther who left Rome, it was really Rome who caused the division.

That was sad outcome of the Reformation, one that we're still dealing with. But it was a necessary one. It was necessary because our unity with each other isn't just a matter of peace and harmony in our lives or in our ministries or in our relationships. Our unity with each in God's Word is a reflection of the unity we have with Father himself.

Jesus prays, “*that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me.*” Our unity with each other demonstrates that we are united with Christ. And if we are united with Christ then we are united with the Father. And if we are united with the Father then everything the Father has is ours. Then we are children of God and heirs of his kingdom and loved by God.

Which is no small thing. It is, in fact, the one and only thing we cling to. The one and only thing we have to offer to anyone. That's why Jesus then says, “*so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*” That's our message.

Here are the words of Jesus, passed down to us through the generations of Christians before us. They will teach you about God's love for you found in Jesus Christ. And if you want to see that love at work, then look at my church. Look at how we love each other. That is how God loves you.

And he wants you to be with him. That's Jesus' final prayer in this passage. *“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”*

Jesus wants us to be with him. He wants us to see his glory. Not just the glory of the transfiguration or the glory of the ascension or the glory of his second coming. No, he wants us to see the glory of his death. The glory of his sacrifice for us. The glory of his love, poured out on the cross.

Because Jesus emptied himself and took on the form of a servant and became obedient to death on the cross, the Father has exalted his name above every name. That is the glory of Jesus that we see.

And it is in that act of sacrifice that we are brought together. It brought the disciples together as apostles. It brings us together as a church. It brings the world together with us as children of God. And it will bring us back to Jesus on the last day. To be where he is and be united with him. Amen.