

A Question That Cuts to the Heart

Is it just me, or do kids always seem to get a second wind right before bedtime? Does that happen to you when you're babysitting or trying to put your own kids to bed? It's always a loud, messy process—but it's a mess I've come to cherish. Goodnight hugs, bedtime stories, last-minute requests, and those “just one more thing” moments have become part of the routine.

Most nights in my home that's the way it flows. Except, one of my daughters has mastered the art of extending bedtime. Just as I think she's finally asleep and I'm quietly tiptoeing out of her room, her small voice inevitably calls out...

“Daddy, can I ask you a question?”

Over the years, I've fielded **questions** like:

- **“Do fish get thirsty?”**
- **“Do worms know they're worms or do they think they'll grow up to be snakes?”**

But one night, she whispered a question that cut through childhood curiosity and touched the very core of our faith:

“Dad, how do we know God is real?”

In that moment, I froze, caught between the innocence of her question and the weight of its implications. I thought about all my seminary training—the theology classes, the countless books I'd read, and the sermons I'd preached—much of which had caused me to miss many bedtimes. Yet, nothing in my **theological arsenal** seemed to equip me for this simple bedtime question. I was completely stumped, feeling like Buzz Lightyear in Toy Story shouting, **“Years of academy training wasted!”**

It's a question we've all wrestled with, isn't it? Across the ages, God's children—like my daughter—have cried out in longing, seeking His presence and revelation. From Genesis onward, in moments of vulnerability or uncertainty, humanity has sought the reality of God—not to win arguments, but to have Him step into our lives in a tangible, unmistakable way.

Here's my prayer: That the one way she will continue to experience the reality of God will be through the people of God—the body of Christ.

Turning to Text: Jesus' Prayer for Unity

Jesus makes this very point in John 17. Our closeness to God is tied to our closeness to one another, and this closeness reveals God's presence in the world.

”...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.” (John 17:21)

Just as my daughters’ relationship to me as their dad creates a relationship between them as siblings, so too, when we draw close to God as Father, we are to draw close to one another as brothers and sisters.

Here’s the really interesting point I want to draw our attention to as we conclude our missions series: this oneness between Christians has a missional purpose.

Notice how Jesus closes verse 21: ”...so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Incorporating Mission Context

In this January series, we’ve explored how prayer, the Word of God, and the local neighborhood relate to God’s mission. Today, we need to consider how the community of God’s people—the Church—relates to that mission.

This brings us to the heart of today’s message: the presence and quality of our Christian community bears witness to the reality of God.

Drawing from Jesus’ prayer in John 17, we’ll make two specific points about this, then close with a commission.

1. The **Surprising** Makeup of the Community Shows Us the **Power of God**. – a power that unites what the world divides. And..
2. The **Enduring** Commitment of the Community Reflects the **Love of God** – a love that preserves through time, trial and grace.

The fruit of this community, that reveals both the power and love of God, may not win a theological argument, but it will answer a far deeper cry—the cry of those longing for God’s presence and revelation.

Let’s begin with the first point: The Surprising Makeup of the Community Reveals Something of the Power of God.

I. The Surprising Makeup of the Community Reveals Something of the Power of God

Scripture: John 17:20-21

”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.”

Explanation:

For many of us shaped by a culture that values individuality, there's something especially compelling in Jesus' words. Faith, as He reveals, isn't just about personal conviction—it's an invitation to a shared, communal life. A life where love and unity become the visible expressions of God's love deeply rooted in our hearts. It's a beautiful reminder that faith flourishes when lived together.

Illustration:

The baptisms last week were powerful moments that brought the weight of Jesus' prayer in John 17 to life. As parents stood there answering the questions, the gravity of their response struck me.

They were asked if they would do everything in their power to ensure their child would be raised to know Christ, and they responded:

"I will, the Lord being my help."

Then, Sam turned to the congregation—to all of you—and asked, "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?" The response was a resounding:

"We will."

That moment was far more than a ritual; it was a living picture of the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17:20-21. Jesus prayed that His followers would be one, just as He and the Father are one, so that the world might believe. In baptism, we see that unity in action. The Church, as a gathered body, commits to walk alongside the baptized, to love, guide, and support them in faith. Those children became the sons and daughters of this church.

Here's the profound part: When parents say, "I will, the Lord being my help," the help Jesus prayed for—the grace to live in unity and love—is often provided through the Church, the body of Christ. The congregation's commitment wasn't just words; it was a reflection of God's work in and through His people, showing that we are often the instruments of His help to one another.

[INSERT SLIDE at "Smile."]

At my first daughter's baptism I looked around the room that day, I couldn't help but **smile**. Why?

1. First of all, I knew That response wasn't just words.
2. Second, my wife, a proud UVA graduate, chose a Virginia Tech grad as the godfather for our child! Now, for some of you, that may not seem like a big deal, but if you've ever been to a UVA-Virginia Tech football game, you know that kind of unity doesn't happen naturally.

Yet, in Christ, we transcend earthy Divisions, even NCAA ones and become a family. That kind of love defies worldly understanding.

But this is the power of Christ in His Church--bringing together people who, by all worldly accounts, shouldn't be united. What else could tear down the dividing walls of hostility that human culture so often builds?

The Church's Legacy of Surprising Unity

[SLIDE – Take Slide down at “Since”]

But this witness-bearing community isn't just about standing together for an Instagram photo op – Consider who the church has been uniting **Since** its inception...

- Jews and Gentiles, who would never share a meal under normal circumstances, were breaking bread together.
- Slave and free, seated side by side, equal in the eyes of God.
- The early church had a radical redefinition of family – Jesus said in Mark 3:33–35...

“Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.’”

This kind of unity wasn't happening in the Roman Empire. Caesar wasn't doing it. The local cities and synagogues weren't doing it. But Jesus was--and still is.

At some level, there should be no explanation for the presence of this body of people other than God's salvation and His call to be one body, united in Christ.

Think about it: In our culture, people tend to gather around shared interests, political affiliations, or economic similarities. We form tribes based on what we have in common. But the Church is different. In the Church, we are united not by what we have in common, but by whom we serve.

Transition to Point 2

[SLIDE – Remove Image at “His Love.”]

This kind of unity--the surprising makeup of the Church--is a reflection of the power of God. But there's more. Our community doesn't just reveal God's power; it also reveals **His love**. Let's look at how the **enduring commitment of the community reflects the love of God**.

II. The enduring commitment of the community reflects the love of God

Scripture: John 17:22

"The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one."

Explanation:

Jesus makes this crystal clear: God's glory—**Which is:** His holiness, love, mercy, grace, and truth—is not something He keeps to Himself. He shares it with us. This glory isn't about worldly accolades; it's about actively reflecting the love that unites the Father and the Son.

Illustration: The Beauty of Diverse Community

[Slide – Put Image back up at “Daughter’s Baptism”]

Let's revisit that image from my **daughter's baptism**.

Standing there with Heather and me were people from vastly different walks of life. The young lady holding my daughter's hand is her foster sister. Next to her are her grandparents, her community Bible study teacher, neighbors, and friends.

Or think of it this way: an African American man from inner-city Chicago, his Swedish-American wife, and their Latin American foster sister, joined by people from Michigan, Pennsylvania, and beyond—and this guy from Virginia tech in the back, where he belongs - a true intergenerational and multicultural cross-section.

That picture is a living representation of the Church's surprising makeup. In that moment, we weren't just individual Christians coming together for a nice ceremony. We were a family, united by something far greater than shared interests or cultural similarities. We were united by Christ. And almost every person in that picture is still involved in my daughter's life. And I've got them on the hook for fifteen years!

Connecting to the Present

[Slide – Remove Image at “World can't explain.”]

Here's the point: The commitments we make to each other - not abstractly, but in real time and in real places and with real faces, are how His presence starts to appear. It's a unity that the **world can't explain**.

Illustration: Rebuilding Coventry Cathedral: Love in the Ruins

In November 1940, during World War II, German bombers devastated Coventry, England, reducing much of the city, including its beloved cathedral, to rubble. Amid the immense loss and grief, a powerful spirit of unity emerged. The people mourned together, supported one another, and began rebuilding—not just a physical structure but a renewed covenant as a community, a promise to stand together in adversity.

"The glory that you have given me I have given to them," Jesus said, "that they may be one even as we are one."

One stonemason, returning to rebuild, said, “This place is where my family learned to love. It’s part of who we are. We’ll make it whole again.” His words captured the power of covenant—not just to restore a building, but to heal and strengthen the bonds of Christian community in God’s love and unity.

The “we” he referred to was the collective effort of stonemasons from across the UK, working together to rebuild Coventry Cathedral’s massive wall. Each mason shaped and placed their stones—some large, some small, some ornate, others simple. Alone, a single stone seemed insignificant, but together they formed something monumental and beautiful.

No mason could claim the wall as their own. It stood only because of the shared work, skill, and dedication of many. Every stone mattered because it was part of the whole.

Inside the ruins, Reverend A.P. Wales found three medieval nails and formed them into a cross. This cross of nails became a profound symbol of the transformation of destruction into a testimony of God's glory.

The reality of God’s glory often emerges through the paradox of suffering and sacrifice, where His grace, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation are most clearly revealed. In John 12:27, Jesus said:

27 ‘Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? “Father, save me from this hour”? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven: ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’

Many are the things that must be done for a church to truly reflect the love of God.

The Church isn’t held together by stones, wires, or nails—it’s built on the foundation of God’s oneness, his forgiveness, and his love. The story of Coventry Cathedral reminds us that love isn’t always easy. It often requires clearing away rubble—whether physical ruins, emotional wounds, or broken relationships—to uncover what Paul proclaims in **1 Corinthians 13** is the greatest thing that remains: the enduring love of God.

Transition:

Reflecting God’s glory through love isn’t just a lofty ideal—it’s a practical and relational commitment. As seen in the story of Coventry Cathedral and the promises we make to one another in baptism, love calls us to rebuild, forgive, and carry one another’s burdens. This kind of love reveals to the world that God is real, and tangibly working through His people.

But here’s the question: Why does this matter? Or better yet, so what? Many people say, “I see love, connection, and even the divine in many places—not just within Christianity.” At first glance, these expressions may look like God’s love, using words and ideas we recognize. But they often fall short, offering illusions that mimic the real thing yet lack its depth and transformative power.

III. Here’s what happens when we as a community commit to reflecting the power and the love of God.

Avoiding the Counterfeits

Our world is overflowing with counterfeits—They are counter because they offer shallow connections, fleeting joys, and empty promises. And yet because there are so many paths seem to lead to truth but end in bondage. Social media gives the illusion of connection, but people are lonelier than ever. Entertainment distracts but cannot fill the void in our souls. Even ideologies and movements that promise belonging fall short, offering identity without true transformation or love.

Without the visible, authentic community that Christ calls us to embody, people are left vulnerable—adrift and searching for something real. But God, in His wisdom, has given the world a solution: His people. We are the antidote to human loneliness. We are the ones called to embody the love and unity of God's Kingdom. And that means committing to the work of building one another up, here and now.

Illustration: The Search for Something Real

From the outside, some might see our tall spire and grand architecture and assume they know us—but they'd be wrong. This church isn't about appearing Godly; it's built on the firm foundation of God's love, it expresses the authentic love of Christ,—one prayer, one act of service, and one relationship at a time.

I didn't grow up Anglican, in fact, the only people I know that were born Anglican are British, my kids or your kids... My journey to this tradition wasn't a straight path. I grew up in a vibrant Pentecostal church in Chicago, where I learned to love Jesus but also wrestled with big questions about faith.

One memory sticks with me. At 11, I cornered my pastor and asked, "Why do we make everyone use grape juice for communion when Jesus used wine?" It wasn't just about the wine—it was about authenticity. I wanted to know: Are we really following what Jesus taught?

That search for depth and authenticity led me through various churches, denominations, and traditions.

Then, I stepped into this church—The Falls Church Anglican—and I experienced something I'll never forget.

Maybe you caught a glimpse of it during the passing of peace. It happens when the formality of the liturgy softens, and God's love shines through in a small, blink and you'll miss it, tangible way.

People cross aisles, move through the transepts, and make their way to greet friends and strangers alike. There's laughter, the sound of babies, and a warm buzz of connection. It's unpolished, even a little chaotic, sometimes I run to both transepts, but it's real. In those moments, we witness the gospel lived out in community—a love that's a little messy, it's not perfect, but it's authentic and alive.

The Commitments Made in Everyday Acts of Love

The week before my youngest child was born was a chaotic time—our house was loud and busy, and we were overwhelmed with everything on our plate. My wife had a prayer concern weighing heavily on her,

but she couldn't even imagine how She'd find time to attend a prayer meeting. So, she texted her prayer request into her small group.

That's when something remarkable happened. Someone from her TFCA small group heard about what was going on and didn't just say, "I'll pray for you." Within 30 minutes, the small group leader showed up at our doorstep, she cleaned the house, she tucked my kids into bed, and insisted my wife take time to go to the church for prayer while she sat in our house and waited.

When I arrived home, I stood in the doorway, stunned. We hadn't even asked for this, but there she was—showing up in the small, tangible ways that reveal God's love. As a pastor accustomed to bringing the light of Christ to others, I can't express what it meant to open the door and see it reflected back to me—It wasn't a grand gesture; it was love lived out in the messy, ordinary moments of life. She passed the peace in the longest aisle walk ever. And it reflected the very heart of God—a God who doesn't just tell us He loves us but consistently shows up for us, even when we don't ask.

God's Love Revealed Through Enduring Commitment

His love isn't momentary or conditional—it's enduring, patient, and sacrificial. It bears with us through our flaws and failures, forgives us when we fall short, and meets us in our deepest need.

When we commit to loving one another in the same way, we become living testimonies of God's love.

This is what Jesus prayed for in John 17—that the world would see our unity and commitment to one another and come to know the reality of the Power and Love of God.

Will you please stand?

III. The Commission

Returning to My Daughter's Question

We started today with my daughter's question: "How do we know God is real?"

Here's what I hope you've come to realize: You can't answer that question for someone alone. It's not something you learn in a Systematic Theology class. The answer isn't found in clever arguments or debates.

A Final Charge:

So, I didn't answer that question for my daughter—the woman from my wife's small group did. And it's what you continue to do. Your authentic expressions of God's love, grace, and unity are shaping her faith and showing her the reality of God. For that, I just wanted to look at each and everyone one of you and say, "thank you!"

You're already doing so many things that express love for another.

- You prepare meals for our guests at funerals
- Offer guidance to young couples about to get married,
- You provide support to those who need a companion on their journey.
- You are there in full measure for life's grandest occasions and its most vulnerable moments.

God loves what you are doing—just like parents delight when their children love each other with the love they've been shown.

Let's continue to foster this here at The Falls Church Anglican.

- **Parents:** Whether your kids are 45 or 8, stay actively involved in their spiritual growth. Read Scripture together, pray as a family, and create space for them to ask questions—big or small. And If you get stumped you already know, don't call me. Call Rev. John Frederick he loves this stuff.
- **Find Someone to Love Tangibly:** There are people who need you. Maybe that's giving a ride to a senior, writing someone a note to show they're loved, or making time to check on a struggling friend.

Here's the commission I said I would give:

People are searching for answers, hope, and something real

I pray that you would commit to this work. To the overflowing expressions of God's love. As Brian Gurney shared last week, you may have to think creatively to get their attention. Host a neighborhood Bible study, start a prayer group at work, or volunteer together at a local shelter. Whatever you do, Show them who we are. Show them the love of God passed between us.

These simple acts point to the reality of God for those who have no concept of what true love looks like. In a world chasing illusions and fleeting promises, your actions make His presence tangible.

So, be the answer. Be the hope. Be the living proof of God's presence. Be the Church.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Your Church. Thank You for the love and unity You've called us to embody. May we be a people alive with Your love, a community that reveals Your presence to a world longing for something real. Empower us, Lord, to live out this mission—faithfully, boldly, and joyfully. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Small Group Leader Questions

1. What does unity within the Church look like in practical, everyday life?

- How have you personally experienced this unity within your church community?

- Are there areas where unity can be strengthened in your congregation or personal relationships?

2. How does the Church reveal the reality of God's love to the world?

- Can you recall a time when someone's actions in the Church made God's love feel real to you?
- In what ways can our actions as a Church collectively point to God's presence?

3. Jesus' prayer in John 17 emphasizes community and unity over individuality. How does this challenge modern cultural values?

- How can Christians navigate the tension between living in a culture that prizes individualism and a faith that calls for relational dependence and unity?

4. The sermon mentions "counterfeits" like shallow connections, fleeting joys, and empty promises. What are some examples of these counterfeits you've seen in your own life or the world around you?

- How can the Church offer an authentic alternative to these false sources of fulfillment?

5. In the sermon, Rev. Isaiah mentions that simple, tangible acts of love can reveal God's presence. What's one specific way you could intentionally embody God's love this week?

- Who in your life might need to see God's love through you, and how can you reach out to them?