

## STILL IN THE WORLD

Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26

John 17:6-19

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TEXT: John 17:11 “And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

PURPOSE: To urge us to affirm the mundane work we do as a church as a part of the mission to which Jesus calls his followers.

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What a weird world we live in! As if the pandemic hasn't spawned enough weirdness, this past week, a pipeline supplying fuel to the East Coast of our country was hacked. That caused the owners to shut it down. And that caused people to believe that there was going to be a fuel shortage, which resulted in hoarding fuel, because, don't you know, my need for gas in my car is more important than anyone else's.

This world we're living in allows countries to play politics with people's lives - Uighers in China, asylum seekers coming to us from Mexico and Central America, refugees from wars in Ethiopia and South Sudan and dozens of other places. This world keeps the residents of what we call “the Holy Land” launching deadly attacks against each other. This world criticizes people who aren't going back to work because their unemployment check is more than they'd earn if they were working, but has nothing to say regarding the fabulously rich people who've massively profited during the pandemic.

The Gospel of John uses the word which is translated “world” to refer to the realm which is conflict with God's desires for humans and all of creation.<sup>1</sup> John's ‘world’ is the realm where it's all about me. It's the realm where individual rights are more important than communal responsibilities. It's the realm where cunning masquerades as wisdom. It's the realm where deceit presents itself as truth. And, more important than any of that, it's the realm in which Christ's Church lives, where the church pays bills and competes for people's participation and loyalty and tries to be useful to its members and its community. The world is a messy place, an often scary place, but it's also the place where Jesus has sent his followers to continue his saving work.

For a very long time, guided by the teachings of Jesus himself, his Church has claimed that we are “in, but not of, the world.” Today's passage from the

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<sup>1</sup>O'Day, Gail R., *The Gospel of John*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995. P. 792.

Gospel of John has Jesus saying that his followers “do not belong to the world, [but] I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:16,18) How’s that “in, but not of” identity working for us? It doesn’t take much of an investigation to reveal that the ways of the world are able to creep in and infect Christ’s Church just as effectively as those anti-God ways can infect any organization. One way that the Church allows the world’s ways to get into it comes from thinking that the church’s business life is separated from its faith-life. On the ‘business’ side, there’s budgets, and buildings, and the constant need to recruit people to help out with the work that needs to be done. On the ‘faith’ side, there’s cultivating our relationship with God, there’s worship in community, and support for people who are ill, or grieving, or spiritually lost. There’s loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Or so it seems. Of course, we think, we meet God in prayer, not in committee meetings. Of course, we think, our faith is nourished when we do justice and love mercy, not when we’re calling people (or being called) to fill a leadership position. But take another look at today’s story from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. The Book of Acts begins with the risen Christ just about to ascend into heaven. As he was leaving, he told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem to receive the gift that God had promised. That gift was the coming of the Holy Spirit. We’ll hear about the Spirit’s coming next Sunday, the day called Pentecost. Today’s story is the only story we have recounting what Jesus’ followers did between Jesus departing and the Spirit coming. And what does this story tell us? It tells us that the believers had a business meeting. It recalls that Peter called the meeting to order. There was one item on the agenda: filling the spot on “the twelve” vacated by Judas. There was a nominating process based on agreeing on the qualifications for the position, and two candidates were put forward. I find it curious that the candidate who wasn’t chosen had three names listed: Joseph, a.k.a Barsabbas, a.k.a Justus. Matthias, the one who was chosen, was just Matthias. Go figure. The community prayed for God to make the choice, which was accomplished by casting lots. With that, Matthias was installed as one of the twelve apostles, and we never hear anything about him after that. He must have been the guy who sits quietly at committee meetings.

This story, as mundane as it appears, addresses the split I was talking about between the ‘worldly’ and the ‘spiritual’ aspects of church. Filling that vacant seat at the table involved the merging of worldly and spiritual practices. The meeting

was called to order. There was an agenda. There was agreement as to the qualifications required of any candidate for the position. That's taking care of business. But Peter recognized the vacancy as divinely ordained – Judas' betrayal was understood as "scripture which had to be fulfilled." Once Matthias and Joseph were nominated, the community, in prayer, asked God to make the final choice, and implemented their trust in God's choice by casting lots.

Right now, our Nominating Committee is seeking candidates for the elected and appointed positions in our ministry. The way they're going about their work involves meetings and phone calls. At our Annual Meeting, we'll elect the people that the committee has nominated. Imagine a process where we let God do the choosing. All eligible people would gather. We'd read off the positions needing to be filled. We'd put slips of paper with the positions on them in Bibles. Then we'd pray. Our official prayer would be, God, this is all up to you. We trust you to choose who's the right person for each of these positions. Alongside the official prayer, some of us would pray, please, God, don't choose me for Treasurer, or for President. I suppose that every prayer would be permitted. But after we were done praying, we'd hand out the Bibles, and the position you find on that piece of paper in your Bible is the position you would have.

Fear not: I'm not recommending such a selection process. I am recommending that we do away with the false dichotomy separating our business practices from our faith practices.

When I was new to parish ministry, I was blessed to be in fellowship with some long-tenured pastors who guided and encouraged me in lots of ways. In particular, I remember Reverend Eldon Ehrhart, a pastor who had been serving churches in central Pennsylvania for decades. I attended a workshop at which Eldon gave a talk about his spiritual practice. He talked about things like having morning devotions with his wife, and about praying for his parishioners, practices which are rather predictable. But then, he said, "and of course, there's our tithe." What? Giving money to the church is a spiritual practice? Yes, indeed it is, especially if it's a tithe, because giving ten percent of our income requires faith that God will provide for the needs of our household. This is just another illustration of the intertwining of the church's business and the church's faith.

In his closing prayer, Jesus was praying not just for his followers who were there in that room with him, but for all his followers in every place and time, right down to us. We are still in the world. We may be vaccinated against the

coronavirus, but, as individuals and as a church, we continue to be at risk of being infected by the world's insidious ways. We are still trying to figure out how to navigate the temporal and the spiritual components of being Christ's Church, his body alive in the world. Like it or not, we are still in the world. The world is not just that realm which is opposed to God's rule; it is the realm to which Jesus has sent his church. We are evidence that God still loves the world, rebellious though it may be. We also are an organization which needs money, and dedicated people, and careful planning, in order to survive.

How in the world can we manage all this? I think it begins with trusting that Jesus continues to pray for us. Jesus continues to ask God to help his Church to be faithful in all things. His prayer today is the same as his prayer that night, not that God would take us out of the world, but that God would protect us from the wiles of the evil one. The prayer he gave us, the one we call "the Lord's Prayer" speaks directly to this: "Lead us not into temptation" – that is, enable us to avoid becoming *of* the world. "Deliver us from evil" – save us from the world's insidious ways.

Jesus continues to ask God to protect us so that we may be one, the same way that he and his Father are one. He wants for us the same loving intimacy that he and his Father enjoy with each other. That's an astounding request. And also, it's a way of being in community that is totally different from the kinds of relationships the world offers. Jesus continues to ask God to share with us the joy that is his. His joy is not some pie-in-the-sky dissociation from the pain and suffering of the world. After all, he asked God to give us that joy on the night before his crucifixion. The joy he wants for us is joy that has its eyes and its heart wide open to the violence, the exploitation of vulnerable people, the machinations of brute power, but is utterly confident that God has the last word. The joy he wants for us enables us to address the worldly challenges we have as a church with a lively faith that assures that God continues to protect us from getting tangled up in the world's ways when we're handling our worldly business. Jesus continues to pray us into the world, not to allow us to be an escape from the world, but to be his ambassadors in the world. Jesus asks God to let us be the salt, and light, and leaven by which the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, to quote the Hallelujah Chorus.

In the world into which Jesus sends us, the world we still are in, we will face challenges. The world's ways will always appear to be impervious to the ways of

God, the ways of love and justice and mercy. We will, at times, feel overwhelmed by our internal organizational needs, and we will, at times, neglect to address those needs with the resources of faith. We will, at times, experience our life together as not at all one in the Spirit, not at all one in the Lord. Our life together, at times, will lack the joy of Jesus, joy that springs from the assurance that we belong to God. But hear this: we still belong to God. We still have Jesus praying for our unity. We still have Jesus showering us with his joy. We still have Jesus asking God to protect us from the world's dangerous ways. And God is still giving Christ's Church everything we need not just to survive in this messy world, but to be the means by which this world is incorporated into the realm where God is fully and finally in charge.