

May 24, 2020
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Ascension Sunday

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

1 Peter 4:12-14

John 17: 1-11



Unity-lmgarcade.com

Belonging To This World

The passage from John, chapter 17 is perhaps the most revealing rendering of Jesus' relationship with his disciples that there is. It is Jesus' prayer to God as he anticipates the end of his own life as the disciples have known him here on earth, and they "listen in" on his conversation with God. It gives us an insight into the sense of almost family and sense of trust that Jesus has with them...and no surprise. After all, most of them when called by Jesus to follow him, did just that, leaving their own homes and families behind.

Here, as Jesus prays, we learn about his final words to this adopted family. It is not all that unlike being at the bedside of a loved one who is dying and who wants to make sure that he/she gets across to family and beloved friends what needs to be passed on. Jesus acknowledges his awareness of what it has meant to him that they have been together, what he has tried to teach them, and what they have learned in their time together. In Jewish custom, a legacy or blessing is passed on at the time of death (as with the inheritance passed on by Isaac to Jacob). In Jesus' case, he empowers the disciples to carry on the ministry of loving one another and caring for others and empowers them with an inheritance of an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to guide and help support them, entrusting them into God's care in this way.

He leaves them a legacy of carrying on the family business so to speak...leaves it to his disciples and to us after he is gone.

It is a somewhat terrifying thing to know that all that Jesus has left in this world is us. But it's true. We are responsible for Christ's "unfinished business" which includes both doing good works in the name of Christ and also letting others know about Jesus Christ...evangelism, actually.

"Now I am no longer in the world but they are in the world," Jesus says to God of his disciples, *"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."* This is Jesus' prayer for his disciples and for us...that "they/we" are one in this world.

Jesus' statement raises an important question. *We are* in this world...some of us might say these days that we are "stuck" in this world...due to the current lockdowns. We are in this world, but Jesus has been clear that we do not *belong* to this world. In just a few more verses further down in our text, Jesus tells us that we do not belong to this world any more than he does! While we are in the world we have business to tend to...Jesus' business that he has left to us to do with the

help of the Holy Spirit. We do not belong to the world...until or unless we let the world claim us. Unless we effectively make idols out of what is around us: our resources and our wealth, our possessions, our lifestyles, our children, our fame, and social media. The list of things that could occupy our time and devotion is endless. In and of themselves these things are not bad. They enhance life for us. But, when we are overly invested in them such that they distract us from God, we are in trouble.

A friend who lives in the city decided to cut back on social media and technology a bit in order to give herself more time to focus on her faith. She left her phone at home one evening before taking a walk. She looked up at the sky (having no phone to look down at) and saw the stars in the sky...even in the city...for the “first time in ages,” she said. How much we all may be missing when focused on things of our own making.

I don't know about you, but this forced sheltering in place and isolation has caused me to be much more aware of things around me...wildlife and nature for example, and many of you have said the same...valuing things like simple face-to face conversation since we don't have it anymore...things that we used to take for granted. And while that can surface feelings of loss and even grief, more importantly, COVID-19 may help us sort out the difference between *being* in the world and *belonging* to the world. Like Jesus tells his disciples, being in the world comes with a responsibility to carry out a legacy. A legacy that reminds us that we really belong to a different world and that we are simply here to carry out the work that he has left us to do. Belonging to the world would mean that we abandon this work in deference to those things that we have come to idolize.

COVID-19 is a real testing ground for us around this question about where we are versus where we belong. Jesus prays that the disciples may be protected while they are in the world for he knows that being in the world is not easy. He also knows that being in the world gives us an opportunity to be “made holy” or “sanctified” as we go through trials like the one we are in. It's not the difficulties themselves that make us holy or sanctify us (although they may bring out either the worst or the best in us). The trials themselves do not sanctify or make us holy like winning an exhausting race. *How* we respond as we undergo the trials matters. How we respond to that which confronts or tests us makes all the difference.

What you and I are going through these days is just such a trial. The Wednesday Bible Study that meets online on Wednesdays at noon...you should join that if you don't already...considered the the myriad of responses that people have had to COVID-19 restrictions. While I was talking with them I realized that all of these responses to the COVID crisis would likely fit with the disciples' responds to the crisis of Jesus' departure from this earth. Here are a few...see if you might fit into one or several or all:

- 1) Anger and protesting
- 2). Denial and avoidance
- 3). Working even harder than before
- 4). Resignation
- 5). Despair
- 6). Catastrophizing

- 7). Altruism
- 8). Practicing giving generously to others

Interestingly enough, those last two responses of altruism and giving, in nearly all of the mental health and well-being webinars and notifications I get, the value of altruism or giving is listed consistently as an important act of self-care. In other words, altruism is good for you or, said theologically, acting like Jesus in times of trial, is good for you...a kind of health sanctification.

Now, if this were a Stewardship sermon, which it didn't start out to be, I'd have to acknowledge that our emphasis here in stewardship season is precisely upon this healthy response :). We are being asked to respond generously as we are reminded of the many ministries and acts of caring that are going on at Woods Church in the midst of this trial and for which we are grateful... generosity in response to gratitude. It's good for you :). End of commercial break.

How we respond in crisis is critical to our well-being. Looking out for each other by doing Jesus' business is the best response we can have. Back in 1947, CS Lewis wrote an essay entitled, "On Living in an Atomic Age" where he addressed society's collective concern of death by an atomic weapon. In it he writes:

"This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things...not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs."

It is not difficult to translate that message from 1947 to today into language suitable for COVID response. We need to be working together, caring for each other and practicing unity...not investing ourselves in the things that divide us.

I recently read a research article that said that political affiliation...whether that be conservative or progressive...is more determinative of our deepest commitments than religious affiliation. This means that being a Republican or a Democrat means more to people than being labeled a Christian, the research concluded.

This isn't good news. Anything that divides us and keeps us from unity—working together—disables our effectiveness to overcome any trial in life, but particularly this virus that is a global trial.

Today is Intercultural Church Sunday...a time for unity regardless of our origins. It is a time that we can celebrate the Church as we work together in unity no matter what differences exist. We all have different backgrounds and we all have different calls but it is the same one who created us and the same one who calls us. Let's respond and act that way.

In our calling ... in the legacy that Jesus left us...we are all charged with doing Jesus' work, just as Jesus prayed in our John text. We are called to respond by caring for others as Jesus did, bringing people together who otherwise might be divided by the world's claim on us.

What does your response look like? Is it one that looks like you belong to this world or to Christ? Is it one that reflects Jesus' work *in* this world without belonging to the world? We are the church...a united community of faith...a united community of believers in Jesus Christ.

Jesus prays not that this community of believers/ the church would be effective or powerful or successful...as important as these might be...but that *they might all be one*. That is our response, for our business is Christ's unfinished business and it is best done together and in unity.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, we give you thanks and praise for the promise you have given us of power and strength in this world to do your work. May we represent you, Lord Jesus Christ, in all of the needs and necessities of this place and this time, and may we rejoice in our unfinished business until the day when you shall come again to claim it, and us, as your own. This we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.