

Sunday January 15, 2022
Lesson 7: In the World, Not of It
Scripture: John 17: 1-24; Ephesians 4: 14

Context:

We continue our unit “Power and Belonging” today. The lesson today comes from the gospel of John and is tied together with a verse from Ephesians. The gospel of John contains many dualities as Jesus compares concepts to make a point. The purpose of today’s lesson is to discern how to live faithfully in the world without giving allegiance to the world.

In the preceding chapters of John before this passage, Jesus has been with his disciples at the Last Supper. Unlike the other gospels, John focuses on lengthy counsel from Jesus to his disciples including what is known as his final prayer for them and the world, the passage we read today. Following both biblical Jewish traditions and pagan rituals of the time, it was customary to have some prayer or address after an event like the holy meal Jesus shared with his disciples.¹ Jesus follows in this tradition to give an inspirational focus and purpose for his disciples to carry forward with his mission.

The prayer follows a different format of how Jesus taught to pray, like the Lord’s Prayer referenced in other gospels. This prayer acknowledges the Triune God and also functions as an exhortation to the disciples and later those who will form the early church. The prayer fully analyzed, is a plea for unity among believers.² Jesus establishes himself in relation to the Father and the Spirit, proceeding to tell those in the world how they are to function and understand the mission in front of them.

Jesus wants his disciples, and those who will read his words, to become a holy people. Jesus wants them in the world, being spared the world’s corruptions, even while not withdrawing from the world in any gnostic way.³ The people of God are not to withdraw so much from the world, they miss their mission to be with others and to also help others on their journey to discover Jesus. Because Jesus has lived, breathed, and taught humanity, there is a focus on how the world is to become a better place. The task of the world improving is the sanctification of the world through the sanctification of Jesus’ disciples – a work which chiefly belongs to him but is to be carried on equally by the Spirit’s momentum.⁴ This comes after Jesus has instructed several things already, including for the disciples to love one another for this is how people will know they belong to Jesus.

Jesus closes the prayer by asking the Father to protect the disciples from the evil one. This is the prayer branching beyond the disciples to go forth to the world. The prayer thus concludes with Jesus praying for those who will believe in him, seeking they may know his glory. And thus, the verse from Ephesians warns the early church to beware of those who lead

¹ Sloyan, Gerard. “John.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 196.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 197.

⁴ Ibid.

with deception and tricks of the world. The early church is to focus on Jesus' prayer for unity.

Application

Last words from the ones we love can be extremely powerful. Some people can say them as they are connected to hospice care, and they know what is coming. Others can leave something behind like a letter where they express and give counsel to their loved ones. In cases of emergencies, they are opened, and the individuals are hopefully given guidance and blessing. Much like the letter I have from my father inviting me to go where I am sent and to embrace the call to serve the UMC faithfully, I am reminded of how those we love often see the possibilities and dreams in front of us.

For Jesus, his last words are focused on something very important for his disciples and for the church. He wants them to focus on unity, the common thread being the belief they have in him. He has shown them how to live and now he invites them to be open to sanctification, striving to model the beauty of the Triune God in how humanity responds to God and to one another.

I wonder what words Jesus would have for us today. Would he repeat his message of unity and belief in him? I can only hope and imagine his prayer for us would be the same for today. Jesus would want us to see the mission isn't about our preferences, our sole ideas of holiness, or our glory. Jesus would want us to seek him in humility and seek to be united in our mission in telling the world about his glory.

In the church, we spend a great deal of time talking about how to be in the world and not of the world. Growing up, it was always about specific actions from where I lived: do not cuss, do not drink until you're twenty-one and even then, be careful, and of course purity when it came to matters of sexual conduct. To do any of those things was to cross a line into the ways of the world, boundaries set before us to give us a way to holiness and our Lord.

Yet the older I've grown, the more I've come to see these were just the beginning ways of talking about the world and how it can influence us. You can choose not to cuss and still treat someone awful by excluding people from the body of Christ. Abstention from alcohol can still be a great gift, and yet one can still do things passive aggressively hurting others. And when it comes to sex, there are all sorts of ways Christians can use bodies to justify abuse, manipulation, and power tactics.

The ways of the world are often focused on control. In one of my classes at seminary, I had a professor who once asked what Triune God we worshipped, because everyone worshipped a trinity. I was initially confused, thinking "Well duh, the answer is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The professor went on to say the world worships the trinity of wealth, sex, and power, and at times the church can sometimes be swayed. My mind was completely blown. He was exactly right as from various times in my ministry and in observation of the world, I have seen us not worship the Triune God, but instead worship wealth, sex, and power in whatever forms they present themselves.

If we are truly to hear and respond to the prayer our Lord gave unto us, we are called to examine if we are seeking to love in the same way God loves. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, constantly dances in tandem, showing us the gift of love, vulnerability, and redemption. There is beauty as the example is given to us in Jesus's prayer and we are invited to participate in his mission to reveal his glory.

Our verse from Ephesians reminds us of how the pursuit of unity will be a constant task. A good family friend and mentor once posted, "When there's disunity among people, ask "Who

is profiting from the division?” The quote stays with me as I think on how usually when people cause division in the body of Christ, it’s because they want something they would not receive with the truth. No one is immune from the temptation. Clergy, laity, and people from outside the church can be susceptible to causing division especially when we think it will benefit us and bring us what we covet or desire.

From my experience, the division comes in attacking others with rumors and half-truths and then allowing fear, mistruths, conspiracies, and suspicion to drive and move us. And yet this is not of God. This is the way of the world, seeking to divide and isolate us so we cannot be who God made us to be in today’s world. Jesus calls for unity and belief in him, something all sorts of people can hold and cling to in the messiness of life.

Why do you think Jesus prayed for unity among the disciples? Who are people who model faithful living to you? What are ways we worship the trinity of money, sex, and power instead of the Triune God? How can division cause harm to brothers and sisters in Christ? What are ways we can be united in Jesus and not divided by our differences?

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