

May 13, 2018
 “In Your Name”

John 17:6-19

Jesus prayed for his disciples, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 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. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

There is a lot going on in this morning’s Gospel reading. It is Thursday of Holy Week and Jesus is preparing himself for what is to come. He is focused on the next day, when he will be tried and executed by the occupying Romans forces and on what will become of his followers after his death. John’s gospel account of this moment brings us into the intimacy of Jesus’ own personal prayer before God. Jesus is not addressing the disciples in our reading this morning. He is not addressing them or us in what to do once he is gone. Instead, Jesus is praying for his disciples. These verses from scripture this morning allow us to overhear that prayer and in so doing, better understand both who Jesus is and what he wants for us.

Chapter seventeen of John’s gospel is often treated as a unit that divided into three parts. Our passage today is the middle part of what is referred to as Jesus’ farewell discourse. The idea of a discourse is misleading however, because Jesus is not giving a speech or presenting the disciples with last minute instructions on what to do after he is gone.

When confronting his own eminent death, how does the Good shepherd care for his flock? By praying for them, by praying for them and us. Think about that truth. Jesus praying on our behalf. Let that sink in for a moment. The one who is at the beginning and through whom everything was created, the who was sent by God as God’s own, the one who is Emanuel, God with us, praying for you and me. Not, “remember to take care of each other, tend to those who are hungry and in need, protect those who are most vulnerable, the widows and the orphans and the illegal aliens.” Yes, elsewhere we receive these specific instructions, repeatedly and throughout the whole of the Bible. But here we have Jesus alone in prayer, the Good shepherd entrusting his flock to God’s protection and care. Jesus, praying for us and we get to overhear it!

As we hear Jesus’ prayer through John’s recorded account of it in scripture we get an unvarnished look at **how Jesus understands himself and his relationship to God**, and **how Jesus understands his followers and their relationships to one another and to the wider world**. The nature of Jesus’ relationship to God is complicated and refuses any direct, self-evident, and all-encompassing description, although we have done our best overtime to simplify the truth of it in our creeds and confessions. The complexity of the relationship is evident in our

passage this morning as Jesus sometimes addresses God, sometimes addresses the, or his Father, and Jesus also returns to that most profound name for God, I am, in referring to himself. While it is hard to follow the varied descriptions it is precisely this sort of complexity that over the centuries that follow, led the church to articulate the understanding of God as a Trinity of three persons. When Jesus prays to God we easily recognize Jesus' humanity. When Jesus prays to the Father things become more complicated, for such an intimate description seems to collapse the distance between Jesus and God's very self. And when Jesus returns here to refer to himself as "I am", the name God gives to Moses in Exodus, (I am, who I am or I will be who I will be), there appears to be no distance separating Jesus and the one to whom all prayer is addressed. Jesus prays to God as we do as human beings. Jesus prays to God as a child addressing a parent. And Jesus refers to himself with the identity "I am", that name that belongs to God alone. If you could not sort all of this out by yourself in hearing this passage a few moments ago, I hope you will find some solace in the facts that it would take the church another four hundred years to arrive at a functional understanding of this complex relationship in its articulation of the Trinity. So if it's confusing, that's a promising place to find yourself.

The second of these two things I mentioned is how Jesus understands his followers, our relationship to each other and our relationship to the world. We know that we are to love one another, that is to say we have heard this before and continue to do our best in trying to live into this vocation. And we know that Jesus loves us and wants the best for us, not just life but life abundant, not just partial joy but a joy that is complete. Again, we know this in that we have heard it many times and continue to do our best to believe and trust that it is true at each and every step and breath in this life. But here we also encounter this language about being in the world but not OF the world. Here Jesus makes a direct connection between what we are called to as Jesus' followers of Christ and his own mission. Just as Jesus was not of this world but became human to lead us into a loving relationship with God, to reconcile us to one another and God, so too are we know sent as his followers. We are sent and sanctified, that is set apart from the whole for a certain purpose, to proclaim God's forgiveness and love.

The church has long understood itself as being both in and set apart from the world. As Christians we belong first to God, but we live out our faith in the world. This tension between the two, the distinction as "not of the world but in it" manifests itself in different ways. The church is the place where we gather around the Lord's table to encounter the risen Christ in one another and that life giving bread, and the church has a google calendar so we can better keep track of what's happening when. The church is the place where we gather to wash one another's feet and to practice the grace to let other's wash ours as well, and the church has an electric bill to pay. We are both in the world but not of it. Mother's Day has nothing to do with our liturgical life as Christians, but it's also what is happening in the world in which we live out our faith. And come on, it's not like mothers are thanked and celebrated too much to begin with, so why wouldn't we want to be part of that in some way!

Perhaps the most important thing about this relationship between followers of Christ and the world in which we live out our faith is found in verse 15, where Jesus specifically prays, emphasizing the point so there is no confusion: "I am (there's that motif of the divine name) not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask that you protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world." Like Jesus we are God's

beloved who are sent into the world, not to be of the world, but commissioned to live in truth and love, to proclaim God's name by the manner of our living, sanctified and set apart, not because we are worthy but because we are forgiven, not because we have our own message to proclaim but that God will use us to proclaim God's message. The fact that Jesus stops here and states unequivocally, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world" is a reminder that we are not to seek escape from the world, but to live in it without succumbing to it.

As Christians our identity rests with God in Christ, and transcends our partisan politics, our denominational or national identities, our families of origins, our bank accounts, our job titles, our resumes and what kind of clothes we wear. We cannot avoid the politics of our neighborhoods and nations and the wider world, anymore than we can stop paying the electric bill. But we are sent into this world not to be of it, not to contribute to the divisiveness and violence, either verbally or through a sinful indifference that looks away from what is done to our neighbors, not to mis-use our gifts by allowing them to contribute to the deepening of the chasms that divide us, but for a mission. Jesus does not pray that we be delivered from the mess, but that we be protected as we carry out our mission to proclaim God's love, even in the inhospitable, messy and even sometimes hostile response we may encounter there. In this morning's passage, in our lives this morning, Jesus' prayer is not for escape but for understanding and protection, that his own would be protected by God, as a mother would her own children.

Rev. Jason M. Donnelly, Ph.D.
Pastor, Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC