

Sent into the World

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John 17:6-19

The Gospel of John includes long stretches whereby Jesus is essentially in soliloquy form. He knows what lies ahead for him and he is telling his followers what to expect. If you have a Bible where the words of Jesus are printed in red, this is where you will find such very long, very dense paragraphs. Scholars call them the “farewell discourses,” and we find ourselves in the middle of them this morning.

This soliloquy, this monologue, is formally directed to God, but it is really directed at us. Jesus is concerned about what we will do when he is gone. He established that we are connected to God through him. Then he asks God to protect us when Jesus is gone. “All mine are yours,” he reminds us, and I will no longer be in the world. When I was in the world, I protected them. Now that I will not be in the world, will you protect them? Will you protect them, God, in the world?

Jesus knows that we likely need protecting from ourselves, from who we can be. But his concern at the moment is the world itself.

But notice the move. He does not ask God to provide us a hiding place, a refuge, a retreat, where we can be closeted off from the world. “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” Protect them. Sanctify them, make them holy. But do not withdraw them *from* the world, but rather send them *into* the world, protected, yes, but more so, fully engaged in the world, its needs, its risks, its brokenness.

As I have mentioned from time to time, my elementary years were spent in Zanesville, Ohio. Zanesville is a county seat city, in the southeast part of the state. If you are driving cross-country along the massive I-70, you will essentially drive through downtown Zanesville. If you look closely, you will see a mammoth church building, made of red sandstone – Central Presbyterian Church. Much of what I learned about the church being sent into the world I learned there, though I didn’t know I was learning it at the time. Though Appalachia itself doesn’t have formal borders, folks from further south, West Virginia largely, made it as far north as Zanesville and often stopped. The church sought to meet the needs of the Appalachian poor by founding called simply the Community Center, that provided food and clothing, and more so, a place to gather and connect. Some who came to the Community Center came to the

church itself, but many did not. They had spiritual needs, of course, and more so, a deep sense of spirituality. So eventually, something called the Fellowship of Christ's Community began, a kind of church growing out of the Community Center. Every Sunday evening, a communal meal was shared and worship was shared. People came together, members of Central Presbyterian Church, neighbors, guests of the Community Center. The church itself devoted space and energy and staff time to this project, which became more than a project. Sent into the world.

Zanesville City Schools needed funding, and so a bond levy was proposed. And the bond levy effort needed a chairperson. I need to ask him how this happened, but somehow, my father was appointed to be that person. My memory of details is fuzzy at best, but I remember a season where he was going to a different set of meetings than he usually went to. He took us to one, a kind of campaign rally where he spoke. My school principal also spoke (she scared the feathers out of me, so I was somewhat worried for my father's safety at that point, but he did OK).

People wondered why a Presbyterian minister would get involved in this. I have learned a lot about this topic since then, about the Presbyterian Church's commitment to public education almost from the founding of the nation. It is where we placed our bet – public education and health care. It's why there are lots of hospitals with the name Presbyterian on them, even if they are no longer formally such. It's why there are no parochial Presbyterian schools (though it's not quite as simple as that).

At any rate, we've been long committed to public education, and so despite people's questioning, it was a natural thing for my father *as* a Presbyterian minister, as a citizen and neighbor and parent, to lead this effort. The bond levy campaign lost in spectacular fashion, which really isn't the point. Sent into the world.

We have choices. We could choose to hide away, to hunker down, to withdraw and retreat and exercise our faith in quiet little corners. That would be fully understandable. Goodness knows that life is difficult enough with work and family and health and finances. What if we retreated, treated this sanctuary more like a fortress, where we stayed in and the world stayed out and we spent day after day and life after life and generation after generation as spiritual hermits, recluses from all that *out there*. It would be understandable. But not eventually. And not ultimately. We know that.

We know that our best and deeper impulses as humans will not allow us to ignore the world around us, that our best and deeper impulses – though never perfect – lead us into community, into engagement, beyond ourselves. And that is because our best and deeper impulses are inspired by God, formed and cultivated by God, who creates us not for isolation but for

connection, and who creates us not for selfishness but for compassion. Even if we wanted to remove ourselves from the world, we could not, because that's not how we're wired.

And more so, for we who have set ourselves on the path of following Jesus, that is not the invitation we have accepted.

For the last several weeks we have been reminded that we have been tethered to God through Jesus, vines and branches. But that is not Jesus' endgame. It keeps unfolding before us. We have been tethered to God, and Jesus asks God to protect us, for a mission, that we might be sent into the world. Not removed *from* it. Sent *into* it.

For the past several days I was at a gathering of Presbyterian leaders, an informal, unofficial conversation with colleagues and friends. There are a dozen or so of us, and while the labeling fails, about half of us would be seen on one side of the human sexuality debate in the Presbyterian Church and half would be on the other side. The "side" nomenclature fades almost immediately after that, but nonetheless that's the rubric under which we gathered. We read a book together, wrote brief papers and shared them, ate together and prayed together.

We met in San Diego – I know, a tough gig, though it rained the whole time. I learned about the jazz vesper service at the First Presbyterian Church of San Diego. It meets every Saturday in the late afternoon. About 50 or so show up weekly, of which maybe 10 are church members. Jazz music, scripture and a sermon, offered to the community, which welcomes in homeless and hungry, people serving in the military, members of the music community who would never dream of darkening the doors of a church on a Sunday morning. Sent into the world.

We could hunker down, retreat, remove ourselves from all that goes on beyond our doors. It would be easier and simpler. But it would not be true to our best and deeper human impulses and more so, it would not be true to the God who calls us, the God to whom we are connected, the God who protects us, the God through whose beloved son Jesus we are sent into the world.

This happens in many ways. It is easy, sometimes too easy, to compile a list of the things we do around here, what we call outreach. On any given week we will tutor in schools. We will offer food to our hungry neighbors, in growing numbers. This week we are providing shelter to people in our building. We go to New Orleans. We go to Kenya. We advocate for fairness and equity for all God's children. We advocate for changes in the way public education happens. And more. It is a good list that I hope we are always reshaping and always expanding. We do those things because they are the right things to do, because our deeper and best human impulses compel us there.

But we who follow Jesus, who understand the nature of our tethering to a God who loves us and protects us, know that that same God, through Jesus, sends us into the world. It is a scary

place, this world, filled with violence and oppression and brokenness. And there are no guarantees that we will succeed. Bond levies fail. Hunger persists. People shoot people. Jesus, the one we follow, was betrayed and convicted and executed for all of this. No guarantees.

And yet we know, do we not? We know that this is our calling, not just within the programmatic ministry of this congregation, but every time we walk out the door, that door, any door, out the door and into the world. And more so, we trust the God who calls us through that same Jesus to walk with us, so that it is not about success, but about faithfulness, and truth.

We could retreat. We engage. With the world. In the world. Into the world. Our faith would have it no other way. Nor would our resurrected Lord. Amen.