

8 September 2019

Church and World

John 17:6-18

John chapter 17 is a prayer, sometimes called the “High Priestly Prayer.” Set in the context of Jesus’ last supper with his disciples before his betrayal and crucifixion, it is Jesus’ prayer for his disciples after he is gone. It’s Christ’s prayer for the church. We read from that prayer now, John 17:6-18:

⁶ ‘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. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for 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. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And 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. ¹²While 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. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴I 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. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

The Gospel of John is a little schizophrenic when it comes to the concept of “the world.” On the one hand, God made the world and loves the world. (Remember, it’s John 3:16 that tells us “For God so loved the world.”) And then a few pages later we find stuff like this that we just read where “the world” appears to be the enemy. The world will hate Jesus’ followers, because they don’t belong to the world, just as it hated Jesus who also didn’t belong. Verses 15-16 again, *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.* So how are the disciples supposed to relate to this world that is going to hate them? Verse 18, *As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.* One way that this conflict is often summarized – though it never appears exactly like this in scripture – is that we Christians are supposed to be “In the world, but not of the world.”

Which sounds great. An excellent, pithy summary. But, like most pithy summaries, it prompts the follow-up question: And, um, what does that mean? How does that work?

Well, here are a couple of ways it doesn’t work. Some Christians have tried the approach of being neither in the world nor of the world. They simply separate themselves entirely from secular society. Some who do this are individual recluses: hermits, anchoresses (women who were literally walled into rooms for the rest of their lives, and stylites (heard of them? they used

to climb up onto platforms on high pillars and live up there in splendid isolation, sometimes for decades). Others have separated themselves from the world in groups: monks, nuns, and the Amish. Now all of these groups are admirable in their different ways – well, the stylites are a little screwy – but they all have one problem: Jesus said, “I send my followers *into* the world.” Besides, it simply wouldn’t work for everyone, logically. I mean, think about it, if all us Christians decided to separate ourselves from the rest of society, where would we go?

So complete separation from the world is, at best, an option for the few, and few have chosen it. Much more common, however, is the opposite path: To be both in the world and of it. This is the way of being assimilated by the surrounding culture so completely that it becomes impossible for anyone to see how the church is distinct from the world at all. This path is not so much *chosen* as *drifted into*, but it has been the path of many. Churches have tried to adopt something from the surrounding culture and have ended up being adopted by the culture instead.

Let me illustrate. Jesus himself left virtually no instructions on how a church should be organized. As a result, churches have always borrowed their organizational structure from whatever was working in the world around them. The early church – the one we see in the book of Acts – designed their gatherings after the synagogue. They were Jews; they knew it; it worked; so they borrowed it. Three hundred years later, when the church was mostly non-Jews and had spread throughout the Roman Empire, it reorganized itself after the model of ... the Roman Empire. (And, yes, the administrative structure of the Roman Empire is still the structure of the Roman Catholic Church.) When churches came to the United States, a new, democratic model was adopted. We began letting all members vote. Before the American church, there was no such thing as a church business meeting for all members. Today, though, most of our churches are organized around a different American model: the corporation. Thus we have CEOs, boards of directors, home and regional offices, district managers, and reports presented at an annual shareholder’s meeting. But what else are we supposed to do? The church has always borrowed its form from the world around it. Why would we not adopt a familiar model that seems to work?

Well, there is one problem. Too often, when the church borrows something from the world, it buys into it wholly, adopting not just the best but the worst aspects. Thus the Medieval Church, still copying the model of the Roman Empire, ended up with a string of autocratic, power-hungry, pleasure-loving, fabulously wealthy, and thoroughly corrupt popes, just like the Roman emperors. Or take our own, corporate-styled church. Yes, it works pretty well in some ways, but we have also blindly adopted some of the less Christ-like features of corporations. How does the American church measure success? As corporations do: in terms of money, numbers, size, and political influence. But none of these are how the New Testament tells us to measure church health – in fact, Jesus repeatedly warns us *against* making these things too important. Nevertheless, when someone asks us “How’s your church doing?” what’s the first thing we think of? Numbers: buildings, budgets, and bottoms in the pews. Here’s another example. How were New Testament leaders chosen? Jesus chose his followers one on one. People like Paul and Timothy were brought into the church by individual mentors and affirmed by congregations. How do we choose our pastors in the United Methodist Church? We have a multiyear process, requiring years of post-graduate education, resumes and a list of written materials to submit, followed by two rounds of grueling interviews. Yes, it’s a corporate search process. Sure, we on the Board of Ordained Ministry are careful to say prayers before our committee process – as if prayer were a sort of spiritual Febreze that you could spray around the

room before doing what you were going to do anyway, but still our leadership selection process looks absolutely nothing like anything that Christ did or taught. It looks like a corporate search process, because that's what it is.

Here's how bad it's gotten. A couple of years ago, the Board of Ordained Ministry was asked to begin work on an employee enrichment and assessment program. I forget what churchy words we used to describe it, but that's what it was. So we met to brainstorm. The question we started with was "What are the characteristics of the ideal 21st century pastor?" And we began tossing out adjectives. Within half an hour we had a flipchart covered with ideas for what would make a pastor effective in our rapidly changing cultural context. At that point one member – not a pastor, but a deacon – raised her hand and said, "I'd sort of like my minister to have a strong relationship with God." Yes, that was the first time anyone had mentioned God. We had gone for thirty freaking minutes and covered a sheet with corporate nonsense words like "nimble" and none of us had thought to include God. I look back on that moment, and I am ashamed. But not surprised. We have so internalized the habits, structures, and methods of the corporate *world*, that we have become indistinguishable from that world. Until Laura brought up God, there was nothing on that flip-chart that would not have worked just as well as a description of the marketing executive of the 21st century. We have been absorbed by the world we have adopted.

My sisters and brothers, it's not supposed to be like that. Jesus sends us into the world, but warns us that the world will hate us. Why would the world hate us? Because we are different. We are supposed to stick out like a sore thumb. And when I say that we are supposed to be different, I don't mean that we are supposed to be nicer, kinder, more charitable, more honest. No, the thing that will make us stick out is not that we have higher standards, but that we have *different* standards. The difference between Christ and his world was not a difference in degree – that he was better than others – but a difference in kind. He had an alien set of priorities and acted in ways that were incomprehensible to his world. To apply that to us, we are not supposed to be better than the rest of the world (spoiler alert: we aren't); we are supposed to be weird to the rest of the world.

For the next five weeks, I'm going to be unpacking that, talking about how we are supposed to be weird in our attitudes toward happiness, wealth, importance, conflict, and success. And I'll tell you up front that this series is likely to be hard. At any rate, I know it's going to be hard on me, because I don't live up to any of this stuff – not by a long shot. The thing is, though, I answered that calling 40 years ago to preach Christ, and I feel as if I should spend a little time actually doing it.