

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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May 24, 2009  
*7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter*  
John 17:6-19

## Sent Into the World

As is our practice in America, this is the unofficial first weekend of the summer—Memorial Day weekend that is. And, wow, it actually feels like it this year doesn't it—summer like I mean? No gray skies with cold rain falling—rain that turns to snow in the pre-dawn morning. It was nice enough yesterday afternoon that the receiving line was comfortably outside after the wedding here at the church. Barbeque grills have been firing up all around our neighborhood this weekend. After the long Montana winter, folks around here are ready for summer! And if you've looked at the calendar, you'll note that our summer is long this year with Memorial Day coming on May 25 and Labor Day—the unofficial end of summer—on September 7. It's like we get an extra two weeks of it this year. But just you wait, it'll probably be more typically cold and rainy next weekend. It is still May after all.

Nevertheless, change is in the air as we transition from winter to summer. Our focus changes and becomes more outdoors oriented. The panoply of summer activities in this place to which people come from all over the world in the summer season await us and beckon us. And for many, families especially, summer is a time for a vacation, when you leave the regular routine and setting, and for a temporary period, live somewhere else and do something else. Many times upon their return from a good vacation, comments like, "I wish I could live like that all year long." or "The scenery is so beautiful, I wish we had that kind of beauty all the time." Good vacations have a way of luring and tempting us away from our routines of school and work. But that same school and work beckon us back to our homes and routines and it falls to us to re-engage.

This portion of Jesus' prayer known as Jesus' Priestly Prayer has a little bit of this dichotomy between the mundane and the sacred. It is a prayer attributed to Jesus in John's gospel that takes place at the end of Jesus' ministry, before his crucifixion. In it Jesus is expressing concern for his followers and for what will happen to them after Jesus is no longer with them. It's a prayer where Jesus is clearly speaking about what his disciples are to do, going forward.

Before I go on with this charge to the disciples, let me pause for a moment to reflect on why it is that this passage is even being discussed while we're still in the season of Easter. Today is in fact that 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, and in the annual liturgical cycle in which the life of Jesus gives structure to our worship life, this is now the last week of the Easter season. Next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday, when the coming of the Holy Spirit is recalled, giving birth to the church of Jesus Christ. But today we are still in that 50-day celebration of Jesus' resurrection. Why then do we find ourselves in the chronology of John's gospel back in the garden in which Jesus was praying *before* he was arrested, sentenced to die, and crucified—in other words, before the resurrection?

Because this prayer is focused on what is to come of the followers of Jesus as they carry on the ministry of Jesus, it is at least as appropriate in the context of after Jesus' resurrection, but before he departs in the ascension, as it is prior to his death on the cross.

There are two points that Jesus makes in this part of his prayer that I believe have relevance for us today. Jesus is expressing genuine heartfelt concern for the disciples that he loves. Over his three years with them he has developed a loving relationship with them not unlike the relationship a parent has with his or her children. There is some anxiety behind Jesus' words that he won't be there to protect them in the same way that he has been able to up until now. He knows that they will be tempted to retreat from the world and to live apart from it. And yet he knows that if they are to carry on his ministry they must be in the midst of the world around them in order to make a lasting impact on the world. As the world has been shaken up by Jesus' ministry, that same witness to and engagement with the world must continue with the disciples.

This same temptation confronts us to this very day as followers of Christ in this time and place. As we go about our living, it can be so much easier if we insulate ourselves from the pressures and realities of the world around us. And ironically, one of the best places for us to hide is in the church itself. There are some Christian churches that don't shy away from this at all. In these faith communities, the church becomes a sort of waiting area—a place to bide one's time until the coming of God's victory over history. In this understanding of the faith, engagement with the world is not a part of what it means to be a faithful Christian.

But one not need be in one of these radical churches to be swept up in this way of isolationist thinking. Even within mainline churches like ours, the idea that somehow we're better apart from those with whom we disagree can begin to carry some weight. The idea begins to take hold that somehow God wants us to be isolated, to associate only with those who are like us and like our understanding of who Jesus is. When this begins to happen we find that our experience of the world becomes skewed for when we build relationships with only those who are like us, we lose touch with the world in which God has placed us to be his emissaries of the good news of Jesus. When this happens we have failed to carry on the ministry that Jesus began. For in his ministry Jesus associated with all sorts of people—both those deemed desirable by the society as well as with those who were clearly outsiders and even societal outcasts. In his ministry in the world, Jesus made no distinctions in choosing who would be the recipients of his ministry.

And lest we think that Jesus' inclusiveness was limited to those who were the objects of Jesus' teaching, preaching, healing and intervention, let's not forget just who made up that ragtag collection of people in Jesus' band of apostles and disciples. For they too were representative of a wide swath of humanity.

So the first point we take from Jesus' prayer is that he desperately wants us to be in the world, engaged with it to the extent that we can reach those who are entrenched in it.

But even more than that, Jesus, in this prayer in effect commissions his disciples to be sent into the world much more intentionally, pushing the envelope in order that the whole world will know of God's love. As God sent Jesus into the world to minister, Jesus in turn sends his followers.

This push, this call, this understanding of discipleship can make us really squirm today. It's one thing that Jesus wants us in the church family to be in the world with a broad variety of people. But it's quite another when we realize that what is further called

for here is ministry and mission to everyone, without limitations. This is in complete contrast to those Christians who are merely biding their time on earth awaiting a better life with Christ to come. When Jesus' prayer is understood this way, we find that the state of the world is of utmost concern to God, and by extension, to God's people.

If this be the case, then it is for Christians to be intimately involved in the global efforts to care for the planet with which we have been entrusted. It's worth noting that in the last 10 years or so, many Christian churches that label themselves as evangelical, that at one time were primarily concerned with personal and individual salvation and the personal morality that follows, have expanded their sights and have become more ardently engaged in the larger environmental movement, realizing that clean air and clean water and access to basic nutrition, health care and education are among the most important aspects of the stewardship of this planet given to us by God. Personal salvation and personal morality are essential and important, but unless there is an adequate home on earth for everyone, this call to salvation is a stretch.

While we have perhaps already been involved in many of these issues over the years, we are still not off the hook for a deepening of our involvement and commitment to caring for the planet and its people.

Perhaps summertime in Montana is the ideal time for those of us in this part of the world to take a closer look at our participation in these global issues. We'll be out of doors a lot. For some of the time we'll be away from our immediate church community. So as we're out and about this summer, I challenge you to see yourselves as emissaries and ambassadors for Christ. Look at the world around you and try to see it as God sees it. Are there needs that we can be part of the solution? As you encounter a larger variety of people across the summer months, try to see them as God sees them—people, some of whom, if not most of whom, have little or no awareness of Jesus and how Jesus can be part of their lives.

Think about it for a moment. The prayer that Jesus prayed in that garden was fulfilled. The fact that you and I are sitting here pondering this at all is testimony to that. For those disciples and for those that followed have passed from generation to generation that which Jesus began in his ministry.

The onus is on us now. It's on you and me. Will Jesus' prayer that they be one and that they be sent into the world be fulfilled in this generation?