

This morning's Gospel comes from the Gospel According to John 17:6-19

The whole of Chapter 17 is a prayer that Jesus offers immediately before his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. He is about to be taken out of the world. In the first 5 verses, Jesus begins by praying for himself, asking God to glorify him so that he can, in turn, glorify God. In comparison to the rest of the chapter, this prayer for himself is relatively short. Most of the prayer is for others.

When this first part is done, his attention shifts to the disciples praying

God, I have revealed you^[a] to those you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me, and they have obeyed your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. ⁸ For I gave them the words you gave me, and they accepted them.

They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ⁹ I pray for them.

I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, they are yours. ¹⁰ All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. ¹¹

I won't be in the world any longer, but they will be. I am coming to you. So God, I ask you, protect them by the power of^[b] your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one even as we are one. ¹²

While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by^[c] the name that you gave me. No one has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

¹³ "I am coming to you now. I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may know the fullness of my joy within them. ¹⁴ I have given them your word. And the world hates them for it. They are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵

But my prayer is not that you take them out of the world, rather that you would protect them from evil while they are still in it. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by^[d] the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I send them into the world. ¹⁹ For them I have been holy, so that they also may be holy.

This is the Gospel of Christ. Amen.

I have a confession this morning. I think I've shared a few confessions in the times I've shared worship with you. This morning is no different.

There are a lot of passages in the Bible that I find uplifting and inspiring. Many that I find informative and instructive. Some even prescriptive. There are some that I find consoling and comforting. But there are others, many others, in fact, that I find hard to read, hard to interpret and even harder to accept. The passage this morning from John Chapter 17 is one of those passages.

My angst centres around a phrase we often hear in Christian circles that says: “we are in the world but not of it.” In the world, but not of it.

To be honest I love the world. I love being in the world. Maybe that’s a second confession this morning. I love the beauty of creation. I love the people in my life – I love my wife, my daughter, my family, my friends. I love my dog. I love my home. My job. I love the colleagues I work with and the good things that we accomplish together. I love living in Toronto. I love the vibrancy of the city. I love its diversity and its resilience.

When I admit to all these loves – and then I read or hear the words of Jesus saying that we are to be “in the world but not of it” - I struggle. I feel uncomfortable.

In the world, but not of it. Does it mean that I shouldn’t love all the people and things I described a minute ago? What does it mean to be in the world, but not of it?

In addition to offering my confessions this morning, I’m also going to run the risk of dating myself. Some of you, who are around my age, will remember a Christian music artist named Larry Norman.

In 1972, Norman began recording an album entitled *Only Visiting This Planet*. In 1973, Norman was named as one of the three Best New Male Artists by Cashbox Magazine. By February of 1973, Billboard was pushing his album for TOP 40 airplay on mainstream radio stations across North America. And by 1990, *Only Visiting This Planet* had been voted by *Christian Contemporary Music* magazine, as the “greatest Christian Album every recorded.” That’s a ;pt pf world acclaim for an album called *Only Visiting this Planet*.

I loved that album. With songs like: "Why Don't You Look into Jesus," "Righteous Rocker" and "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music" it had a profound impact at the time on my growing understanding of faith and spirituality and belonging in Christian community.

What was I thinking?????

Only visiting this Planet???

Visiting??? I love this planet. I love living here. There is so much about this world, and this planet, that I love. Why would I only want to visit?

When I was ordained, one of the questions I was asked by the council was whether I believe in heaven? I do believe in heaven. Unfortunately, it wasn’t quite in the same way that many of the people attending my ordination council that night - and who were voting on my suitability for ministry - saw it.

I had a hard time that night trying to articulate what heaven might look like. I talked about its dynamics and nature being informed by the people I loved. I talked about it being a space or a place (I wasn't sure) where I could fully experience with God the kind of parental love my parents – both my mother and my father – had shown me. For me there was no gender to God – love pushed character beyond gender. Heaven for me was a way of being, of existence, where we could all be ourselves, where we could fully love, and be loved. And beyond that, I didn't know. I wasn't sure. I'd never been there.

Needless to say, my theology didn't go over well. It certainly didn't meet the orthodoxy of the crowd that was there that night. Long story short, I did end up being approved for ministry that night – but not because I declared myself in the world and not of it. Rather, I think, it was in spite of it.

What I came to believe that night was that I didn't want to live my life burdened by the idea of what heaven might be like – or even what hell might be like. I wanted to live with an appreciation that life on earth can be heaven and it can be hell. And that we can help make it heaven for ourselves and for our families and for our friends. And we can also make it hell.

So, I decided I wanted to live for heaven on earth – and leave whatever else comes after – to God.

Part of our dilemma with difficult passages like this is, as with so many aspects of our lives, that we tend to latch onto only part of the truth, or onto half-truths that leave us ill-equipped to ask the questions we really need to ask, and to do what we need to do. Too many of us, myself included, have plucked passages like this out of context, resisting or avoiding the words and teaching that come along side them.

Jesus said, “be in the world, but not of it.” But he also said, God, my prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from evil while they are still in it. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Tell them the truth. Make them holy by your truth. Even as you have sent me with your truth, send them with your truth, that your world might be holy.

Part of the secret to understanding this passage, and so many others in scripture, is to read them as what Donald Kraybill describes, as an upside-down passages. So many of the things Jesus said sound foolish if taken literally. Jesus came to tell us things that are not obvious and to offer a worldview that is contrary to the one our culture holds. He called us to see things in upside down ways. He called us to turn the world upside down.

In his prayer, Jesus asks God to tell his disciples the truth – to make them holy by his truth – to open their eyes to everything that is going on around them – to be present – to be awake – to be alive in the midst of everything going on here on earth.

I want to be in the world NOT BECAUSE THE WORLD LOVES IT because God loves it and because our presence here is a story of that love for the world. I want to be in the world because our presence here is a story of God's intimate and infinite presence with the people and everything else that belongs to this world. It is a declaration of a love that will stand in the midst of both joy and grief. A love that will stand alongside hurt and triumph. A presence that is communicated by a mother's love – happy mothers day mom. By a father's love. I love you, Dad. By the kind of love we have for our partners and our children. Jan and Bethany, I love you

beyond words. I love my friends. I love the people who love me. I love the goodness I bring to life and the goodness that life brings to me.

When we celebrate these divine things on earth, we begin to crowd out the spaces where evil can live. We begin to crowd out the hell on earth so that heaven on earth can take hold. We bring light to the darkness. God in us brings heaven to earth.

Being in the world and not of it – is not an excuse or a permission to look down on our friends or culture or societies with judgement. It is not our ticket avoid the grief and struggle that is so ever present around us. Rather, it is Christ's invitation to live his loving life in the world here and now so that God's divine love and life can be made real as heaven on earth.

I love the world. And I love that God has put me here. And I love that God has put you here too.