

Being Easter People: Belonging
John 17:6-19
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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“Because they are yours...”

Those words stand out for me as I hear this scripture read.

Here in the middle of what has been called “Jesus’ high priestly prayer” Jesus prays for his followers. According to the gospel writer John, this prayer comes in Jesus’ last moments of freedom, last hours of life. In fact, it is in the next chapter that Jesus is arrested.

But chapter 17 contains Jesus’ prayer: for himself as he faces what is ahead, for his followers as they try to remember who they are called to be in his absence, for those who across time and space will become his followers.

So, here, in the central part of the prayer, we hear Jesus talk about belonging.

“They were yours...”

“They are yours...”

“They do not belong to this world...”

Over and over we hear claims that get to the core of who the disciples are and who they are called to be. And these claims are rooted in their connection to God, their belonging to God, their citizenship in the realm of God not in this world.

And it is easy to romanticize this. It is easy to make it more abstract. It is easy to pretend that this simply points to a heavenly reward. It is easy to pretend this means that the disciples will be protected from anything difficult. But those explanations don’t take the whole text into consideration. After all, while Jesus says that they do not belong to the world, he does not say that they get to escape it.

Rather, this is not a text meant to make everyone feel better about how easy it is to belong to God, but one that points them to the challenge of this commitment.

Think about what was going on with the disciples at this point. This is Thursday in Jesus’ last week of life. This is the day before he will die, not a natural death, but the day before he will be killed on a cross as a convicted criminal. This comes in a week

where tensions have been high, where it has been clear that every move Jesus made put him at greater risk. This comes in a week where it is known that certain people are out for his blood, are tired of having to fight against the understanding that he is teaching and encouraging.

And Jesus knows that these aren't just his risks, but these are risks of each one who follows him...especially if they are following faithfully. In light of this, he prays for his disciples because he knows that belonging to God and living in God's ways is risky business.

So, what happens if we are honest about what it means to belong to God?

What happens if we are honest about what it means to not belong to the world even as we live in it?

Friends, we have become too comfortable with the assumption that we can take Jesus as our Savior, be baptized, claim the title of Christian and then live in the ways of the world. We have become too comfortable with organized religion that is deeply embedded in national systems so that the distinctions can barely be seen or sometimes don't even exist.

And yet, this is not the way of Jesus.

Thomas H. Troeger wrote, "Again and again we read that Jesus and his disciples 'do not belong to the world,' that is to say, the world's claims do not shape their essential identity, faith, and values" (Thomas H. Troeger, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, 547).

Can that be said of us?

What would it mean for us to do the hard work of truly examining our lives...honestly...with the questions of who and what shapes our "essential identity, faith, and values"? What would we find?

A couple Wednesdays ago when the Bible study group looked at this passage together, I asked them to make a list of worldly values and a list of values of the realm of God.

Here are the lists they made.

Worldly values:

- Money
- Greed
- Power

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- Selfishness
- Fear
- Apathy
- They even stretched their conversation far enough to acknowledge that some things we value and count on, like planning for emergencies and retirement – something we call wealth management, might belong on this list as those of us who are among the “haves” build up wealth while so many in our community and world go hungry.

So, are you wondering what they put on the list of values of God?

- Charity
- Care of others - especially the least
- Love - not the feel good kind, but love that does the best for others even when it doesn't feel good; the kind of love that invests everyday in doing both the big and small things that make a difference for others; the kind of love the Greek called agape
- Paying attention
- Empathy.

What would you put on these lists?

How would your life compare?

If I am honest, there are so many things that are values of this world that I just go along with, so many that I am so deeply rooted in that I don't even know how to critique. And there are so many systems around us that are shaped by the world's values that it is admittedly difficult to even know how to live apart from them. This is especially true when it comes to our relationship with money and with power.

So, it is important that we pause occasionally and remember what the values of God are. It is important that we pause occasionally and look honestly at who Jesus was. As someone said in Bible study that day, “It gets easy to just read the scriptures because we know them - sometimes we need to get overwhelmed by the responsibility and what we've been asked to do.”

So, what would it look like for you to live in this world but to be rooted in the values of God and in your identity as a follower of Jesus? What would change in your life? How would those changes impact others?

Again quoting Troeger, “[The disciples] are to stay in the world under the protective care of God. They are to live amidst all of the knotted complexities of the world without themselves getting engaged” (Troeger, 547).

So, how do we, the disciples of Jesus in this day and age, “live amidst all the knotted complexities of the world without...getting engaged”?

Friends, there are no easy answers. But these are important questions. If we are going to claim God...if we are going to wear the title of follower of Jesus...then we must ask ourselves the difficult questions not about what we say but about how we live, about how our lives reflect where our identity is rooted and our values are shaped.

If we are to live as Easter people, then we are challenged - and it will be a challenge - we are challenged to choose again and again the ways of the God to whom we belong. May it be so.