

“Church in Public”
John 17:6-19
Rev. Andrew Connors
May 12, 2024
7th Sunday in Easter

When my children were little, someone gave me the good advice to let them hear me praying for them. Sometimes at bedtime I'd stand in the doorway and pray some version of the meta prayer - may she be safe, may she be happy, may she be healthy, may she be at ease. I don't know if hearing those prayers made a bit of difference to their psychological sense of self. But I have seen the impact that praying for someone else in their presence can have on a person, and have felt the impact that it's had on me. There is something about another person holding hope for your wellbeing in the center of their consciousness, using whatever cred they have with the creator of the universe purely for your benefit that can make you feel not only loved but strengthened for whatever challenges lie ahead.

Jesus prays for the disciples in what has been called his “high priestly prayer” that becomes a model for the church in so much of what we do. It's why we pray for people before they go into surgery, or before we start a congregational meeting, or last week with BUILD before we enter an action with the candidates for Mayor. We put whatever we are doing, whatever we are hoping to accomplish before God with the hope that whatever we do might be in accordance with what God wants in the world, expressing our hopes and dreams while also subjecting them to God's direction or correction.

For weeks, John's Gospel has had us focused on the internal relationships of the church. Jesus the shepherd has encouraged us to create a community that privileges risking ourselves for each other. We've heard Jesus celebrate our dependence on God and each other. We examined admonitions to love each other inside the community of faith, creating an alternative community in the midst of a world that is more often organized around accumulation, or winning at the expense of some.

All that internal work might have led some of us to the conclusion that John's Gospel is dangerously sectarian, promoting a kind of withdrawal from the world. Are we really going to focus on the efficacy of prayer while children are starving in Gaza, bombs are still falling in Ukraine? Are we really going to focus another week on prayer and other internal matters while national and local elections are the external focus of our news cycles and many of our concerns? Why spend so much time on our internal life?

For some, a retreat from worldly stuff is exactly what church is supposed to be about. It's why some Christians get nervous when people like me talk about politics from the pulpit - aren't we supposed to rise above politics? It's why others create

churches like islands of culture in and unto themselves sometimes with full campuses that include gyms and coffee shops so you can surround yourself with spiritual things and religious people all the time.

This separation between the spiritual and the secular, the holy and the profane has its roots, of course, in our traditions including scripture itself. From the clean and unclean provisions of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the purity regulations involved in right temple worship to the dualism right here in John's Gospel where the disciples are described as in the world but not of the world.

Many disciples through the ages have wanted to escape from the world, treat this very place as a literal sanctuary from all that is challenging, dangerous, or risky by insisting that we can avoid the chaos of the world in our prayers, our worship, our activities, our community. And that kind of desire to escape the world makes sense. Sometimes the world can get so bad, people can be so wretched, ethical norms can be so ignored that it makes sense that we would all want to come here to hide from what's going on out there.

Indeed that must have been a strong temptation for the community of John that was struggling with the reality of being ousted from the synagogues where those early Jesus followers thought they belonged. Given their own upheaval and the dangers they sometimes experienced in an empire that wasn't particularly hospitable to any monotheistic faith at the time, you can see how tempting it would feel to retreat to their own group of like minded followers.

The history of that kind of retreat from the world is a periodic feature of the church. It almost always ends badly. One chief example is the way in which some influential Presbyterians defended slavery in the 1850s. Many abolitionists in that period were troubled by the ubiquity of slavery in the United States including the Philadelphia based Presbyterian minister Albert Barnes who in 1846 noted that the "great questions of industry, literature, agriculture, commerce, and morals" so involved slavery "such that there was not a town, school, or church throughout the northern and southern states untouched by this unjust practice."¹

What made the defense of slavery so pernicious in my reading of history was not the theologians who tried to defend slavery as an intrinsic good, but rather those who argued that the church's role was not to engage such questions in the first place. James Henley Thornwell, one of the most influential southern theologians of this time, understood slavery as "a part of the curse which sin has introduced into the world."² But he compared it to other ills that we might describe as part of the human condition such as poverty and war - unjust things that would persist until the eschaton. The responsibility of Christians was not to try to end such systems, he argued, but rather to

¹ I am indebted to my alma mater, Columbia Seminary, for the article, "What, then, is the Church?," published June 3, 2020. The article does not specify the author.

<https://www.ctsnet.edu/at-this-point/what-then-is-church/>

² Ibid.

exhibit righteousness and extend mercy at an interpersonal level, from individual to individual.

For Thornwell, the Church's mission consisted of four things: to announce what the Bible teaches, to do what the Bible commands, to prohibit what the Bible condemns, and to enforce church discipline through spiritual sanctions. Since in the Bible "the master is nowhere rebuked as a monster of cruelty and tyranny," according to Thornwell and "the slave is nowhere exhibited as the object of peculiar compassion and sympathy," Christians needed to do nothing other than remain silent on this matter. The Church was not "a moral institute of universal good." It was not called to "construct society afresh" or "rearrange the distribution of its classes."³ Rather, the Church was a spiritual entity only, responsible for biblical teaching, administering the sacraments of baptism and communion, and discipline solely within congregational and denominational confines.

Thankfully, the church as "spiritual entity only," is not what Jesus taught his disciples as he prayed for them here in John's Gospel. Yes, the disciples do not belong to the world. Jesus is aware of all the ways that the world tries to shape us - to shape us to fear others whom we do not yet know; to shape us to chase after wealth and accumulation for ourselves, to shape us to do unto others whatever we fear they will do to us. To refuse to belong to the world is to affirm that Christ's command to love God and neighbor is the one word we have to hear and to obey.

But disciples are not schooled in the way of Christ to sit at home and retreat from the world. We are sent into the world that God loves. We are sent into a world that is sometimes hostile to the message of love and justice that Jesus has embodied and taught. We are charged with bringing that message into the world for the sake of the world's transformation. "I am not asking you to take them out of the world but I ask you to protect them from the evil one," Jesus says (17:15). We are to live in the world, transforming it, sustained by God's loving, protective care.

This is the proper pursuit of holiness, according to John's Gospel. It's to remember who you are in a world that would prefer for you to forget. It's to nurture all the love and grace that you cultivate in and through the community of faith so that you have something significant to bring to the rest of the world. Church is not an escape from the world - it is the place where we are to be shaped, nurtured, replenished, and prepared for our living in it. So that when we return to the world each week we have something significant that we can contribute toward shaping it.

You saw that in action if you attended the BUILD event last Tuesday night.⁴ People of faith, bringing our communal worldviews, shaped by our Abrahamic traditions

³ Ibid.

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<https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/politics-power/local-government/scott-dixon-build-housing-RLIVX7TTHJHZNL2IBNCEF723LE/>;
<https://www.baltimoresun.com/2024/05/07/baltimore-mayor-candidates-vacants-build-forum/>;

into the public square for the benefit of everyone. I think a lot of people who have never seen this kind of organizing in action get nervous when they hear “people of faith” and “public square.” They get nervous because the examples they are familiar with usually involve people trying to impose their sectarian religious views on other people against their will. And they are not aware that when the church has acted as a spiritual entity only, saying nothing about what’s going on in the world, it actually created deep harm. And perhaps they’ve forgotten that in this country when human beings have taken seriously Jesus’ admonitions to love your neighbor as yourself, we’ve seen wars ended, segregation overthrown, and poverty reduced.

What we overheard on Tuesday night were prayers, similar to the prayers that Jesus gave in the hearing of his disciples. Prayers for a healed city where the unjust divisions between races, neighborhoods, and classes are overcome. Where neighborhoods receive a similar kind of investment and intentionality that goes to downtown. Where business, government, and civic sectors are in relationships deep enough to handle to transform the natural tensions there into transformation that benefits everyone. We saw candidates challenged to talk about issues, respect real leaders who give their time, sweat and tears toward changing our communities for the better, and we got a taste of what a healed city could look like simply from the multi-racial, multi-faith teams that comprised the event. In other words, our internal relationships, forged from the foundations of our faiths, have something significant enough to shape the world.

Whenever I’m on the verge of losing hope because of the state of the world, I bring to mind these experiences. Sure, it’s a small group of people in the face of enormous problems in the world. But so is our Christian story - a small group of disciples shaped by Jesus, who go on to shape another groups of disciples who go onto to shape another, and another, and another to make their external world a little more loving, a little more just, a little more whole.