

## Mission for the World

### John 17: 6-19

Today, we are continuing our journey through Jesus' last moments with his disciples according to the Gospel of John. The text that we read today is part of a larger section called the "Farewell Disclosure. It is John's version of Jesus' last minute instructions for his disciples.

It's funny to think about how we as people of faith really don't spend a lot of our time focusing on these moments Jesus had with his disciples. Sure, these moments are our focus during Holy Week as we celebrate Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But usually, these verses that make up the Jesus' farewell Disclosure aren't really on our radar as people of faith. Which is unfortunate really because in these few verses, Jesus shows his disciples, tells his disciples and in turn shows us all we all need to know to continue living out our calling as disciples of Christ.

Now one would think that knowing the timing of these verses and what follows these particular verses, Jesus would be more intentional in choosing what he says, especially since these are his last words to his disciples. And in a way he is. It is just not what we expect. Because instead of a list of instructions or a to do lists, all things we would expect Jesus to do or give his disciples, Jesus' last words

to his disciples are a prayer, which makes his last words to his disciples all the more powerful and moving.

Let me explain: As I worked on this sermon, I started thinking about the disciples who were gathered around Jesus that night in the upper room, the ones overhearing this prayer. They had just finished dinner and needless to say, it was different from their usual Passover feasts. During this dinner celebration which normally only celebrates God's act of liberating God's people, Jesus also calls them to be servant leaders. Jesus also reminds that their mission is not to just expect God to save God's people once more but also that they are to be active in the saving as well. They are now to be partners with God in about bringing healing and wholeness for all of God's creation.

Then when Jesus realizes that they are not getting the concept of servant leader, he unwraps his robe, grabs a towel and a basin of water. He then gently washes their feet with care.

Then, after this humbling act, Jesus tells the disciples that he will be leaving them soon but they will not be left completely alone. Jesus tells the disciples that God will be sending the Holy Spirit to work in this world on their behalf. He tells them that the Holy Spirit is there to guide them and comfort them. It is there to give them strength for the journey.

At this point, if this talk about being servant leaders and the Holy Spirit wasn't confusing enough and let's face it intimidating enough for the disciples, Jesus goes on. He begins to talk about his death. He begins to say how one of his disciples would betray and how Peter would deny him. It suddenly becomes very clear to the disciples gathered around that table that this was not their usual Passover feast. Something significant was happening. Something important was coming up. Something was changing.

Suddenly after Jesus' words to them, everything was different. I'm sure Fear and Worry were taking over for the disciples. Uncertainty about the future was flooding in. And what was worse, I imagine, was the doubts that began to fill the disciples' mind at that moment. Because, let's face it, They hadn't been the most stellar students under Jesus' mentoring during his time here on earth. And all of sudden, Jesus was leaving them, trusting them to carrying on in his name, entrusting them with the important work of building up the Kingdom of God here on earth. I'm sure the disciples are all looking around at each other and thinking to themselves, "What on earth is Jesus thinking? Entrusting us with this mission of love and grace for the world?" He has got to be kidding!

I'm sure it was an uncomfortable time for the disciples after dinner. No one knew exactly what was going on. I'm sure they had a million questions but weren't

sure where to begin to start asking any of them. They were probably confused. They were certainly scared. And I bet one of the thoughts that kept circling around their minds was Can't we just go back to the way it was, to the way it used to be when Jesus would teach us about the Kingdom of God, the way it used to be when crowds followed Jesus around? Can't we just go back to the way it was, the way it was before all this talk about death and dying started?

You know, the disciples had to be uncomfortable after this unsettling dinner. This time gathered around the table ushered in the uncertain future for the disciples. It ushered in a time of change and transition and no one, certainly not any of the disciples had any answers. They had no idea what the future would hold for them. They had no idea how it was all going to turn out. All they knew at that moment was Jesus was leaving them. All they knew was that he was entrusting them with a mission of sharing God's love and grace with all the world. What in the world was Jesus' thinking?

As I have pondered this moment of uncertainty for the disciples, I can't help but think we as people of faith are feeling the same way nowadays, especially after a report that was put out a few days ago by the Pew Research Center. I'm sure everyone heard something about it on the news. This latest study was releasing the numbers that indicated the religious landscape of the United States. And if you haven't heard, let me just fill you in a bit: We are dying. "The Christian share of

the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing. These changes are taking place across the religious landscape, affecting all regions of the country and many demographic groups. While the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly pronounced among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of all ages. The same trends are seen among whites, blacks and Latinos; among both college graduates and adults with only a high school education; and among women as well as men.” The study just released tells us as a religion Christianity is dying. This bit of news about the changing religious landscape has created uncertainty for the Church, confusion for the church, all very similar to what I’m sure the disciples were feeling when Jesus shared his bit of news with them as well.

We live in a time where The future of the church is uncertain.

Now, everyone is probably wondering where this bit of news leaves us as people of faith. I’m also sure everyone’s other main concern is where does that leave me, your pastor. After all, I picked a sinking ship for my job profession.

Don’t worry. I’m sure I can find something to do with a Masters of Divinity. After all, I hear the Holly Hill Inn is hiring.

All joking aside, it has been fascinating to listen to the conversations percolating in the Church world surrounding this latest study. The conversations have ranged from doom and destruction to circling the wagons. But not once, I have heard a reference to these numbers being a wake up call for us as people of faith nor I have heard an acknowledgment that these numbers truly reflect the many ways that we as people of faith, as disciples of Christ have strayed from our mission for the world in which Jesus entrusted to us.

But that is exactly what these numbers indicate. We as the church, as people of faith have lost our way. We have gotten so caught up in the numbers that we have forgotten that we are called to share God's love and grace with all of God's children. I don't have to look any farther than this past week to tell me that this is true.

First experience happened earlier in the week. I was talking with someone the declining way of life for many institutions in our society especially for the Church. Another person joined the conversation and through his words, I could begin to see where we as people of faith had lost our way. He simply said, "You only want us younger people to come to church because you need someone to pick up the pieces. You don't really care about what is going on in our lives. The church doesn't care that people are hungry, that people are struggling in poverty. The

church only cares about the numbers. All the church wants is for us young people to come in, fill in the empty positions, and give money. The church doesn't care about anything else except its own survival.”

Ouch! How does one respond to this? The sad thing is I know he is right. It does seem like the Church's only message to the world is come fill our empty pews, come help us make our budget. It does seem like the Church's only message to the world is come and join us but we want you to think and act like us. It does seem like the Church's mission statement is: We need you but we don't really care about you.

Okay, that was one incident where the Spirit was me showing how far from our mission of grace and love we as people of faith have truly strayed. The other incident happened on Thursday while I was getting my hair cut. Long story short, I was with a new stylist. We began to talk. She knew I was from Midway and shared that her husband was the sous chef at 815 Prime. We began talking even more. I shared I was the pastor of Midway Christian Church. And then she asked the question. She asked where did our church stand on the Fairness Ordinance that was coming to Midway.

Now I knew this was the critical moment. A lot rode on my response, not the least of which was my hair cut. After all she did have sharp scissors. If she didn't like my answer, one slip and everything could be a disaster.

So I told her that our elders had written a letter in support of drafting a fair ordinance and at that time, our church was the only one in Midway to do so.

She thought for a moment and said, That is great. I grew up in the Church and it was nothing but what not to do. It was always don't do this or don't do that. It was always don't do but there was never really any love. I get so tired of people telling me what the Bible says. I know what the Bible says. I have read it multiple times. I just want someone to show me what the Bible says to do and that is to love one another. I've been looking for a church. Maybe I'll come and visit.

Now whether this young woman comes to church or not, I don't know. But once again our conversation became a clear sign to me that somewhere along the way, we as people of faith have gotten away from this mission of love and grace that Jesus entrusted us with on that night. It became a sign that we have forgotten Jesus' prayer for us as his disciples. And now is the time to refresh our memories on just exactly what Jesus' prayed to God on our behalf.

You see there are basically three parts to Jesus' prayer:

"1) the world can be difficult

2) Christianity does not provide an escape from life's difficulties but rather offers support to flourish amid them

3) We as disciples of Christ are here for a purpose: to care for this world God loves so much."

That's it. These three things are what Jesus' holds in prayer on behalf of his disciples. We aren't given a list of what not to do. We aren't given a list of instruction. Instead what we are given is a mission. And it is the same mission Jesus had on earth, which is to care for this world God loves so much.

You see the world we live in is changing. It is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. We don't all fit into nice neatly defined boxes. People don't want to come to church just to try to fit into those boxes that don't work anymore. People don't want to come to church just to help give money to the budget.

What people do want is a real life authentic life transforming experience with the Kingdom of God. People want us as people of faith to step into real life situations where it is messy, where it is full of grey areas. People want us as people of faith to care for this world which God loves so much. People want us to care.

Which ironically is the exact mission Jesus entrusted us with on that night in the upper room. Maybe it is a good thing the institution of Christianity is dying so that it can make way for something else, make way for some new life where

healing and wholeness can really happen, where we as people of faith can reclaim our mission for the world, where we can show all of God's children that we really do care.

Or in the words of one of my favorite authors, "Lately I've been wondering if a little death and resurrection might be just what the church needs right now, if maybe all this talk of waning numbers and shrinking influence means our empire-building days are over, and if maybe that's a good thing. Death is something empires worry about, not something gardeners worry about. It's certainly not something resurrection people worry about...As the shape of Christianity changes and our churches adapt to a new world, we have a choice: we can drive our hearses around bemoaning every augur of death, or we can trust that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead is busy making something new. As long as Christians are breaking the bread and pouring the wine, as long as we are anointing the sick and baptizing sinners, as long as we are preaching the Word and paying attention, the church lives, and Jesus says the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. We might as well trust him, since he knows a thing or two about the way out of the grave."

We have a mission for this world. Maybe it is time we listen to Jesus' prayer and remember just exactly what he entrusted us to do. Amen.