

May 24, 2009

Scripture: John 17:6-19

Sermon: "Not of this World"

We continue our journey through Jesus' last moments with his disciples according to the Gospel of John. For the last two weeks, we heard John's version of Jesus' last minute instructions for his disciples and this week, we hear about the very last moment that he has with his disciples before his arrest, betrayal, and crucifixion. This whole section is called the "Farewell Disclosure. And for us, it seems sort of strange that we are hearing about Jesus' last moments with his disciples when just a few weeks ago we heard and celebrated the rest of the story: Jesus' resurrection.

It seems sort of strange to go back and take a look at those last few moments that Jesus had with his disciples, to hear once again his instructions, to get a glimpse into a very intimate moment between master and disciples, between teacher and students, between Jesus and his friends. It seems sort of strange to go back and review the instructions once more in light of what we know as the rest of the story: the resurrection.

Or does it?

Jody and I had a conversation about how I chose what I am preaching on every week. I told her for the most part, I follow the lectionary. I follow the scriptures that have been set out for each Sunday for churches to hear the message. It is a rotation that happens every three years.

I told her sometimes I get lucky and the Scripture that is chosen for lectionary "fits" what is going on in the life of our church. Sometimes it seems that it was chosen just for us to hear. And then sometimes, it is a struggle to work with the Scripture and make it "fit" what is going on in our church.

Well, it seems like for the last few weeks, the lectionary has been right on with what has been going on in our church and in my. And I have even heard from several of you that it seems to be right on with what is going on in your life as well.

And this week, for me, it is no different. Because we hear about Jesus' last moments with his disciples, his friends, and we understand them in light of the resurrection, and in light of the time when Jesus is separated from his disciples and they are left alone, afraid, confused, and unsure of what the future holds for them as followers of Jesus Christ.

And Jesus offers them words of comfort, not in the form of instruction, but in the form of prayer on their behalf.

As I worked on this sermon, I started thinking about the disciples who were gathered around Jesus that night in the upper room, overhearing this prayer. They had just finished dinner and needless to say, it was different from their usual Passover feasts. Jesus calls them to be servant leaders and when he realizes that they are getting the concept, he unwraps his robe, grabs a towel and a basin of water, and then gently washes their feet with care. And then after this act, Jesus

tells them that he will be leaving them soon but they will not be left completely alone. That God will be sending the Holy Spirit to work on their behalf, to guide them and comfort them, to give them strength for the journey.

And if this talk about being servant leaders and the Holy Spirit wasn't confusing enough, Jesus begins to talk about his death. He begins to say how one of his disciples would betray and how Peter would deny him. This was not their usual Passover feast.

And then to top it all off, Jesus gives them a new commandment: to love another as Jesus loved them, to rely and support one another, to be responsible to and for one another.

It was an uncomfortable time after dinner. No one knew exactly what was going on. They had a million questions but weren't sure where to begin to start asking any of them. They were confused. They were scared. And they just wanted it to go back to the way it was, to the way it used to be when Jesus would teach them about the Kingdom of God, the way it used to be when crowds followed them, the way it was before all this talk about death and dying started. The disciples were in a very uncomfortable time of change and transition and no one knew the answers. No one knew what the future would hold for them. No one knew how it was all going to turn out.

And at this moment of confusion, at this moment of uncertainty for the disciples, Jesus offers them a few last words. And these last words are not "instructions on how to be better but a prayer to God" on their behalf. And the disciples are invited to listen in on this conversation, on this very intimate moment between Jesus and God, on this very real, very emotional, very vulnerable moment which shows how much Jesus cares for his disciples, for his friends.

And as I pondered the disciples' reaction to this moment of change, this moment of transition, to this moment of uncertainty, I realized that this prayer is simply not just prayed on behalf of Jesus' disciples who lived two thousand years ago, but that this prayer is prayed by Jesus on behalf of you. It is prayed on behalf of me. It is prayed on behalf of all of us as communities of faith. And it is a word of reassurance in an unsettling time. It is a word of hope in a time of transition. It is a word of encouragement in a time of uncertainty.

It is a word of strength for the journey ahead.

And that is the Good News that I bring this morning. That we "can take heart that others have been here before us", in this time of change, in this time of transition, in this time of uncertainty. And we can remember "that we have one another. That we have assurance of the Word. That we have the comfort of knowing that 'we are a community for whom Jesus prays.' "

By offering a prayer on the disciples' behalf and on our behalf, Jesus is "entrust[ing] the community to God's care." Jesus is offering up the hope and the fervent desire that the community of faith will live a life "shaped by the knowledge of" God's love. Jesus is reminding God of God's promises of security, the promises of protection, and the promises of new life. Jesus is offering up the comfort that is found in the arms of God for his followers then, two thousand years ago and now.

Jesus is offering up a prayer of strength on our behalf as followers who have experienced the power of new life through the resurrection. And it is only by looking back and remembering this prayer through the lens of the resurrection; we will have the strength to continue our journey through this uncertain time.

It is only by looking back and remembering how much Jesus' loved us and continues to love us that we can support, love, and encourage one another in this time of transition and change.

We like the "disciples, [have a] very human desire to 'cling to what [we] have known while realizing that things are no longer what they were before.'" And we like the disciples "have a need to 'rethink [our] priorities, reorder [our] lives, and reconstitute [our] community.'" "

And that is a daunting task. That is a very scary task. That is a task that comes with a million questions and not many answers.

But we can find comfort, strength and hope that we are a part of the community for whom Jesus prays.

And that is the Good News for this community of faith at Midway Christian Church. We are a part of the community for whom Jesus prays.

We as a church are going through a time of uncertainty. We are going through a time of change and transition. We are going through a time where we are being asked to rethink our priorities, reorder our lives, and reconstitute our community. And it is a daunting task. It is a scary task. It is a task that has a million and one questions about how it is all going to work out and what the future will hold for us.

And in this time of change and transition, we are invited to listen in on the prayer that Jesus is lifting up on our behalf and to find comfort, strength and hope in being a part of the community for whom Jesus prays.

Jesus' last words to us as people of faith is not a list of instruction on how to be better people, or to live out our faith more fully in our lives. Jesus' last words to us as people faith is a prayer to God on our behalf.

May we take comfort and encouragement that we have God there to guide us and lead us during this time of change and transition. Amen.

Rev. Heather McColl
Midway Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)