

Sent Out into 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 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 last few 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 which make up Jesus' farewell Disclosure aren't normally 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 need to know to continue living out our calling as disciples of Christ.

Knowing the timing of these verses and what follows these particular verses, Jesus is intentional in choosing what he says, especially since these are his last words to his disciples. It's just that his last words to the disciples are not what we expect. Instead of a list of instructions or a to do lists, all things we would expect Jesus to do or give his disciples, instead 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 who were overhearing this prayer. The disciples thought they were gathering for their usual Passover feast only to discover Jesus had something else in mind. Because during this dinner celebration, a celebration which normally only celebrates God's act of liberating God's people, Jesus also calls them to be servant leaders. Jesus reminds that their mission is not to sit back and expect only God to save God's people once more. Rather Jesus tells them this time around it is a both and situation. Yes, God is at work in this world. God is also inviting these disciples to be active in the saving as well. The disciples are now partners with God in bringing about healing and wholeness for all of God's creation.

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

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 something significant was happening. Something important was coming up. Something was changing.

For the disciples, everything was different after Jesus' words to them. 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, were the doubts that began to fill the disciples' mind at that moment. Because, let's face it, they had not been the most stellar students under Jesus' mentoring during his time here on earth.

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!

It had to be an uncomfortable time for the disciples after that dinner. No one knew exactly what was going on. They probably had a million questions but didn't even know where to begin in asking any of them.

At this moment, after Jesus had said all this stuff to the disciples, basically commissioning them to go out into the world as his followers, I'm sure the disciples were probably confused, certainly scared. And I bet one of the thoughts that kept circling around in 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?

This time gathered around the table ushered in the uncertain future for the disciples. It ushered in a time of change and transition. 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. We live in a time where The future of the church, for the church is uncertain.

That's why it has been so fascinating to listen to the conversations percolating in the Church world recently. From all denominations, our Disciples of Christ included, the conversations have ranged from doom and destruction to the need to circle the wagons. But not once, I have heard a reference to this uncertainty about the future of the Church being a wake up call for us as people of faith. Nor I have heard it embraced as an acknowledgment that this uncertainty may 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 this uncertainty indicates. We as the church, as people of faith have lost our way. We have gotten so caught up in fear and worry that we have forgotten 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.

Earlier this week. I was talking with someone about the declining way of life for many institutions in our society especially for the Church. Another person joined the conversation and through his words, it became obvious that just because we might not think we have lost our way as the church, other people do.

This person 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.

This conversation became a clear sign to me that somewhere along the way, we as people of faith truly have gotten away from this mission of love and grace with which Jesus entrusted to us on that night. It became a sign that we have forgotten Jesus’ prayer for us as his disciples. It became a sign that it is the time to refresh our memories on just exactly what Jesus’ said when he prayed to God on our behalf that night in the upper room.

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. It is the same mission Jesus had on earth, which is to care for this world God loves so much.

No one denies that 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. So it is no surprise that people don't want to come to church just to be forced to fit into those boxes again. It is also no surprise that people don't want to come to church just to help give money to the budget.

What people do want when they come to worship, when they come to be a part of a community of faith is a real 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 love this world which God loves so much. People want us to make justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God in all we do and say.

Which ironically is exactly what Jesus showed us how to do on that night in the upper room. Maybe it is a good thing the institution of Christianity is dying so that 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, words that are so appropriate for us to hear as this Easter Season draws to a close. She says "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 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."

As followers of Jesus, as disciples of Christ, as ones who praise a Risen Savior, we have a mission for this world. Maybe it is time we remember just exactly what he entrusted us to do. Amen.