
WORDS OF PROMISE

Though we're at the last Sunday of Easter, today's Gospel reading puts us back at Maundy Thursday, the night before the crucifixion.

- Chapter 17 of John's Gospel is called JESUS' High Priestly Prayer as JESUS prays for HIMSELF, HIS disciples, and finally, all believers.
 - The section we read today is the portion of the prayer for us, HIS disciples, as JESUS prepares for HIS death,
 - and after that, HIS departure from this world.

I served as a chaplain at two different psychiatric hospitals.

- One of my supervisors was missing the first two joints of the index finger on his left hand.
 - He said that, while this shorter finger made typing more difficult, it came in handy when he spoke publicly,
 - because he could make points (right) and subpoints (left).

This portion of the High Priestly Prayer is the second part and it has three subpoints, three promises, that we will consider today.

The first promise JESUS makes is about the world.

V. 14 says, *"I have given them YOUR word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world."*

- JESUS's word of promise is that the world can be a difficult place.
 - I know that doesn't sound like much of a promise, or at least good news, but it is the truth.
 - And though many voices urge us to imagine that if we buy the right product or vote for the right candidate, everything will be just fine, this must be a place where we don't pretend and where we seek the truth.

Even preachers like Joel Osteen will tell you that if you believe the right way or do the right thing, GOD will make you healthy, wealthy, and happy. That's a lie.

- Nowhere in scripture are we promised that GOD is some sort of cosmic slot machine who, if we pull the right levers to please GOD, will give us the jackpot.

The truth is that life is both beautiful and difficult, wonderful and painful.

- JESUS, nor we, would do any good service to sugarcoat the message that HIS departure from the world can make life more challenging for HIS followers.
 - Anyone who has lost a loved one, been through a divorce, or got fired from a job knows that life in this world at times can be hard.
- Though not sounding like good news, this is a word of promise.

The second word of promise in this passage is about our place.

V. 11 says, *"I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world."*

V. 15 says, *"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."*

- How much easier it would be if we were just with JESUS.

Perhaps you've heard it said that we are to be in the world, but not of the world.

- Though we live and are needed in this place and time, our values are to be those of the ONE who has gone to prepare a place for us.

There are two different understandings of the Christian faith for us in this sometimes difficult and painful world.

- One version believes that when you come to faith, everything becomes peaceful and wonderful.
- The other version believes that faith will help you keep your footing amid a world that shakes and trembles.

JESUS' first promise, that the world can be difficult, means that we are not exempt from struggles.

- But JESUS' second word of promise is that we are not alone in our struggles, that our heavenly FATHER goes with us to keep our faith strong and protect us from the full power of the evil one.

And the third promise today is about our purpose.

- There are two terms to which we should pay attention here.

The first is "given" or "giving."

- Nine times in this passage a form of "given" is used.
- Seventeen times in the chapter "given" is spoken.
- And in John, "given" is voiced.

So, what is given? Well, everything, of course.

- But foremost among these things is us, given by GOD to JESUS as precious;
 - knowledge of GOD as our loving parent;
 - the word of truth about GOD's love for the world,
 - and us, again, as those chosen by CHRIST and sent into the world to make a difference.

This leads to the second term to notice: "world."

- While "world" often suggests that entity that is at odds with GOD—*"the world has hated them"*—there is also the term used in John 3:16: *"For GOD so loved the world..."*
- The world can be a difficult place, but the followers of JESUS can make it better.

That's right. This difficult and painful world is still dearly loved by the ONE who made it.

- And the word of promise about our purpose is that GOD chose us to go and bear witness that GOD loves the world even when it runs contrary to GOD's design or desire.

There is one more term to which I want to call your attention today.

- That is the word, "sanctified."

In v. 19 JESUS says, *"For them I sanctified MYSELF that they too might be truly sanctified."*

- "Sanctified" is one of those big seminary words that is the same word we translate as "hallowed" in the LORD's Prayer.
- To be sanctified is to be hallowed or made holy.
- "Holy," in turn, means to be different.

JESUS makes HIMSELF holy—different from the rest of the world—so that we, HIS followers, might also be holy,

- and that we, in turn, might have a role in helping the world to become a more holy place.
 - It is important to note, though, that we cannot create “holy.”
 - We can only witness “holy,” to see how GOD is blessing our encounters and the circumstances around us by making them holy.
 - In other words, it is our awareness of GOD’s presence in our world and in our relationships that make something different or special,
 - and it is our purpose to let the world know that GOD has and is making the world and us holy.

So, dear Christians, look forward into the week ahead for a moment and begin to imagine how GOD might create “holy” through you

- and make this world a more trustworthy place.
 - Will it be through being a good friend to another?
 - Might it be by listening to someone else’s struggles?
 - Will you be one called to stand up for someone who is vulnerable?
 - Could it be by simply doing an exceptional job at work?
 - Or will you answer a need by volunteering to make a difference?
 - Might you be GOD’s instrument for creating “holy” by praying for those in need?
 - Or will you invite someone to church to hear the truth that GOD’s abundant love is for us all?

You may not know how it will be, but you can know that GOD is at work in us and through us for the sake of this beloved world,

- and that this week again, we are invited to take part in GOD’s unfolding plans for holiness.

Let me end today by adapting JESUS’ words of promise into a closing prayer:

Dear GOD, whose love knows no ending; we know this life is beautiful and difficult, and sometimes both at the same time. We do not ask that YOU take us out of this world, but that YOU go with us to support and protect us while we are in it. We pray that YOU set us apart in the truth we have heard here, that YOUR love is for everyone; and we ask that YOU would send us out from this time of worship to bear witness in word and deed to YOUR grace, goodness, and love. May we hear YOUR voice calling us at home, at work, at school, in our social settings, and in the places we gather and volunteer, so that we might feel and share YOUR love and be instruments of YOUR holiness.

Amen.