

John 17:11b-19

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Series B)

Lessons for the Day: Acts 1:12-26; 1 John 5:9-15; John 17:11b-19

Strangers in an All Too Familiar World

May 13, 2018

Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

One of the most familiar and famous pictures from the era of the Viet Nam war is a photo of Vietnamese civilians trying to board an America helicopter on an apartment rooftop, which was a residential quarters for various US diplomatic personnel in Saigon, just before the fall of the city in April of 1975. The helicopter seems out of place, and it looked so inadequate, compared to the long line of civilians waiting to get on board any means of transport that could take them safely out of the city. In all, thousands of American and South Vietnamese citizens were evacuated to safety as part of “Operation Frequent Wind”, before the North Vietnamese forces overran Saigon.

It is hard to imagine what it would have felt like for those who were given that opportunity for freedom and safety. It is even harder to imagine the feelings of emptiness and despair for those who were left behind. Instead of a flight to safety, they had to go on living in a land that had become dangerous under the oppression of an enemy. They were now strangers and aliens in a land that had been their home.

This past Thursday the church celebrated the Ascension of our Lord, and His glorious return to His heavenly Father. The writer of Hebrews reminds us: *For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.* (Hebrews 7:26 - ESV) Now, seated at God's right hand, the Lord of life rules over all things in heaven and on earth for the sake of His people. That brings comfort and hope to us, for again, as Hebrews tells us: *Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.* (Hebrews 7:25 - ESV)

That promise—that He *is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him* is so important, especially as we read the words of our text today. As Jesus prays for His disciples—and for us—He says: *I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.* When we find ourselves surrounded by enemies, oppressed by those who do indeed hate us because we bear the name Christian, we may worry and wonder about the days before us. We may wish that the Lord would take us into the safety of His eternal kingdom. We may feel that we have been left behind, and aren't sure what that is going to mean for us in the days to come.

The words of our text are part of Jesus' “High Priestly Prayer”. It was the prayer He prayed on the night before His crucifixion. He prays for His disciples, including all of His disciples, of every age. Jesus specifically says: *“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,* (John 17:20 - ESV) He rejoices in those who have come to know Him as both Lord and God. He prays for our growth in faith; for our testimony to His name, and for our unity with one another and with the Father. But what stands out before us today is the fact that Jesus prays for our protection as we live in this world.

Why would we need that protection? We need God's help for our lives, for we find ourselves living as strangers, as foreigners, as aliens in the world. The life we have in Christ changes us. It gives us a new identity; a new direction for our lives; a new way of living. To be in Christ puts at odds with the world. Jesus says that *they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.* As one of our hymns reminds us: *I'm but a stranger here; heaven is my home* (LSB 748, st. 1) Through God's grace, we know where we belong; we know where our true home is.

Yet for the time being, this world is where we reside. We live in this world, but the world hates us because we are in Christ. Oh, it may not always seem obvious, but the hate and loathing are real. Netflix has a television series, “Bill Nye Saves the World”. First of all, Nye has done anything but save the world. The Saviour of the world is the One who gave Himself for all the people of the world. He died and rose and is the Ascended King. No one else has, nor ever will, come close to doing what Jesus Christ has done. What Nye does is mislead the world. He denies the existence of God. He says that the idea of God creating the world is frightening and misleading. He even calls Christians ignorant, uninformed people. Sadly, there are many like him; many who seek to rid the world of the truth of God. We are called intolerant because we speak the truth of God in the world—and the world doesn’t like it. This is what Jesus is talking about when He prayed: ***I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.***

As the disciples of Christ we are strangers in this world. At the same time, we tend to be all too familiar with this world in which we are to be strangers. It often seems that we do far too much to blend in, to be part of the world. In our text, Jesus prays: ***Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.*** The word *sanctify* means to make holy, to set apart as holy. When we are in Christ, we shouldn't fit in to the world, because we are different from the people of this world. We are set apart to be the holy people of God, through faith in Christ. Paul spends a great deal of time talking about this “you were—you are” transition in us. He tells us: ***How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*** (Romans 6:2-4 - ESV)

Even though we must be in the world, we are not to be part of the world. Yet we are worldly. Christians often tell the same off-colour jokes as the people of the world do. Our vocabularies can easily slip back into the worldly expressions that seem so inappropriate in the mouths of God's people. We can covet the things of the world with the best of them, but then we spend so much more time among the things of the world than we do among the things of God. How often do the world's temptations keep us from hearing God's Word in church? How often do the temptations of the flesh keep us from walking in God's truth? We want to fit in. We don't want to be hated and despised. We let the world and the things of the world have far too great a part in our lives.

The devil is happy when he sees God's people surrendering to this earthly existence. But there can be no dual citizenship for God's people. John reminds us: ***Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.*** (1 John 2:15-16 - ESV) Paul regretted that he lost a coworker, saying: ***For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.*** (2 Timothy 4:10 - ESV)

It is in the face of these temptations and troubles that Jesus prays for us. He, who has ascended into heaven offers this prayer for us: ***I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.*** Christ doesn't load us all up on a helicopter and fly us to the freedom of heaven—yet. He leaves us in the world—not to suffer in this world, but He leaves us here for the sake of the world. There is a mission that Christ has for His church. It centres on God's great love for all mankind. He sends us to free people from the grip of the world, as we share with them the hope and life that is ours in the name of Jesus. ***But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth***” (Acts 1:8 - ESV), Jesus says to the disciples and to us. I leave you here, because the world needs the good news that you can share. It won't always be easy, but I will be with you. I will help you. And I have asked the Father to protect you. You can be sure He will do this.

As we live in this world, we can rejoice that Jesus has delivered us from the evil one. He fought the battle for our salvation, giving Himself in our place on the cross. He overcame sin, death and the devil through His holy life, through His innocent suffering and death, and through His glorious resurrection. He overcame the world and all its evil for us. The dying, rising, ascended Lord is our life and our salvation. He is our help and strength in the temptations of this world. He is our shield and defender against the wiles of the devil. And He will protect us. He will help us as we live as strangers in this world. His Word does guide and direct us. It does comfort and encourage us. More than that, the ascended Lord is still with us. He isn't just 'up there'. He is here, even now. Remember His promise: ***For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.***” (Matthew 18:20 - ESV) Trust Him who says to you: ***And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.***” (Matthew 28:20 - ESV) Rejoice that the Lord comes to be with you as He gives us His very body and blood in Holy Communion.

As we struggle through the day to day existence of our lives, the Lord is with us. His grace and mercy are greater than our failures. He will bless us with the strength we need for the days ahead. He sanctifies us in His truth. And the day is coming when He will lead us safely home—that glorious home of heaven where we will be with Him forever. Amen.

