

Scripture and Sermon - May 17, 2015

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

John 17:6-19

[Jesus said:] "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

"And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth."

Let us pray...Amen.

I love words. I love playing with words, working with words, spelling words, exploring the limits of words. And so it will come as no surprise that I feel compelled to explore the words that come from scripture: God's Word.

Now, there is plenty of room for how we understand the Word of God, how we understand its origins, and how we understand its meaning, both its original meaning, and its meaning for us today. And the United Church of Christ makes no rule or creed in order for us to be united in our love of God's Holy Word. We can differ widely in our interpretation of scripture and still worship together, still receive communion together.

In our John passage this morning, Jesus is offering a final prayer before his betrayal and arrest. And it's interesting to note that he does not pray for himself. He has no request of God except that God watch over them, protect them.

I'm not exactly sure when I first became aware of the word 'worldly'. Maybe somewhere around Junior High School. I read a lot. But the idea of being worldly seemed exotic, sophisticated, cosmopolitan. To be worldly seemed like a good thing. With enough education and travel, one could become worldly. With enough savvy, with enough life experience, one could become worldly.

But in his prayer to God, Jesus doesn't make being worldly sound all that good! In fact, it's the opposite of good! Jesus declares himself to be no longer in the world, but laments the fact that the followers he loves, and the followers to come, are in the world, and that the world hates them. He implores God to watch over the followers who are in the world, and vulnerable to the world's hate. He beseeches God to protect those who do not belong in the world, but are in it nonetheless.

Words. On one hand we see the value of being worldly. And now, on the other hand, we see how being worldly is exactly opposite of what Jesus would have us be.

But now that I look at it this way, it makes sense that we put value in things that are 'out of this world', and 'otherworldly', doesn't it?

Things always get a bit dicey when a pastor decides to wade into philosophy in the midst of a sermon, but here we go! We know from scripture and from our faith, that

Jesus was clearly not of this world. We know he was *in* the world, as human as each of us is human, and that he experienced pain and suffering far beyond what any of us will likely ever experience. His resurrection and ascension to heaven essentially confirms for us that Jesus really wasn't of this world, if we need such confirmation, but what are we to do? What should the followers of Jesus do when we are in the world, and not *of* the world? What are we to do when the world tells us it's a good thing to be worldly, but our Lord and Savior is saying that that very same world hates us for our faith? It's no wonder Jesus asks God for our protection!

Words. *In. Of.* What's the difference? In the world. Of the world. How in the world can we be *in* this world without being *of* this world? Jesus said *twice*: we do not belong to the world, just as he does not belong to the world. But what does that mean?

Well, for those of us who follow Jesus on the Way, it can mean a whole bunch of things. It can mean that we value peace over profit. It can mean we value justice over power. It can mean applying the values that Jesus teaches us in our Holy Scriptures *even when the world pressures us to ignore the teachings.*

In the world, it's easier to blame the needy for their plight than to help them. In the world, it's better to get yours first, and not worry about what your neighbor needs. In the world, it's more important to be worldly than lowly. Power is key, and money is power. If you have more money, you have more power, and in the eyes of the world, the ones with the most money have the most power.

And to give up that power is to be foolish. Which is why those who choose to feed the hungry and give up the power of their resources are considered foolish. Which is why those who advocate for others, who have no voice, are hated, because they give up their power for others.

When we choose to follow Jesus, we are choosing to put down our worldly power and resources and act on our faith instead. And when we do that, the world will hate us, because we are telling the world that it no longer has any control over us.

Words. I know that this is a difficult sermon. I know that when we get down to the nitty gritty on the meaning of words, many start to drift off. But we can't let the allure and the siren songs of the world keep us from seeing that we are *in* this world, but not *of* it!

It's good to stop and take a few moments to reflect on how we relate to the world, how we practice our faith, and if the two ever clash. If we were to throw ourselves wholeheartedly into worldly pursuits, I believe we do damage to our faith journeys. If we throw ourselves wholeheartedly into faith pursuits, we stand out as targets for a world that demands our attention, our resources, and our souls.

Most of us cheat: we profess our faith to ourselves and maybe others, but we mostly participate in the worldly pursuits. We have to. There are mouths to feed and bills to pay. No matter where we are on the spectrum, it's always a little of both. History has shown us those who pursue faith at the expense of the world, but they are rare...the contemplatives who isolate themselves in prayer, the monks and nuns who dedicate their lives to prayer and service, who give up the chance to feed mouths and pay bills. That can't be all of us.

So maybe we just have to trust that God answers our Lord and Savior's prayer, and that we are protected from the worst of the world's ravages as we live out our faith lives. Maybe we can trust that God has our backs when we move toward using our resources as Jesus would have us do, instead of as the world would have us do.

Maybe as we reflect on how it is that we negotiate being in the world, but not of it, we learn to listen for God's Word, the very Word Jesus brought us, we will find ways to choose Jesus over the world.

In our Acts passage, Jesus says that God knows everyone's heart. God knows our hearts. And God knows whether our hearts are set on worldly things or on faithful things. If, in your reflection, you determine that too much of your heart has been set on worldly things, the good news is that we can always choose to follow the faithful path Jesus has set before us.

Being in the world and not of it is a complicated and confusing existence, but at least if we are aware of our role in the world, and in our faith journeys, we can make good, informed choices about how we share our resources. And tomorrow, if we need to, we can choose our faith journeys over the world, even if today we chose the world.

I believe God answers the prayer that we be protected. But I also believe that we can choose where our hearts and treasures belong: with the world, or with Jesus. Let us always choose wisely. Amen.