

“In this world but not of this world.” That’s a phrase I’m sure we’ve probably all heard at one time or another. In the Brethren world, it’s a pretty common sentiment. In fact, for many years of our early history, we tried to make our lives fit that sentiment in a very literal way. Along with our Anabaptist sisters and brothers, the Amish, and the Mennonites, we lived in intentional communities with the most minimal contact possible with the so-called “English” world around us. We dressed plainly and lived the most simple lives possible, sharing by our example what we believed to be the ideal Christian life. But over time, we slowly moderated that approach to our faith walk, and gradually integrated ourselves into the world around us. For good or ill, that notion is now just an historical memory, or a tourist attraction in the primarily Amish areas of the country that still remain.

That does beg the question, were we right in the notions of the past, or are we right in the way we live our lives now? There were certainly advantages to the old ways of doing things. Living in and for the community, making decisions as a community, and upholding our interpretations of the ideal Christ-like life were all positive ways to go about living out one’s faith. Likewise, integrating into culture, being a part of society’s fabric, makes it possible for us to have an influence on those who are not part of our faith tradition, and can be a much more intimate witness on those we interact with in our daily lives.

So which is the right approach? Or is either way correct?

Jesus’ prayer in John 17 touches on some of this dilemma. While it’s structured as a pastoral prayer to God prior to his departure from this world, the function is

better understood as instructions and guidance for the first disciples that he is leaving behind. John's gospel really focuses on the relationship between Jesus the son and God the father. From the first chapter where Jesus is presented as the logos, or Word, or reason for being, he is often portrayed in John as being almost synonymous in many ways with the Father. His words are God's words, he is next to God and almost indistinguishable from God at times, in the way John portrays who Jesus is. Yet he is also human. When we hear in liturgies the phrase the "mystery of faith," that is part of what's being referenced, this notion of incarnation, of God in human flesh, of the Divine in the profane. As confusing and mysterious as that concept may be, Jesus ups the ante in today's reading by saying that we, like he, also "do not belong in the world." The key word in the Greek in this passage is "kathos" which translates as "just as." So, we don't belong in the world, "just as" Jesus doesn't belong in the world.

If we really think about it, that phrase can be very problematic.

Jesus doesn't belong in the world because he is the Incarnation, God made flesh. Jesus has Divine origins that are not tainted by the corruption of the worldly realm. Yet we are fully human, born and bred in this world, fully subject to all the imperfections it contains. But is that an accurate statement? In Genesis we are told that God made humankind in God's own image. So can we be completely bereft of all divinity? Or do we all have a Divine spark within us, that piece of God that reflects God's nature within each one of us.

That can be an uncomfortable thought for many. For centuries, we have put such an emphasis on our capacity for sin, on the doctrine of original sin, that we

often become so obsessed and guilt-ridden over our potential for brokenness, that we lose sight that we are created to be something different. Buried deep within each of us is that wisp of the Divine that has been in each of us since the dawn of Creation. We reconnect with that spark when we realize the Spirit at work in our lives as we choose to follow Christ. So in that sense, like Christ, we too have an intimate connection with God, and also do not “belong to this world.” But what do we mean exactly when we say “of this world.” Do we mean this physical world around us? Or are we referencing something else?

Often, when we think of being “of the world, but not in the world,” we are thinking in terms of two worlds, one of perfection which we think of as “heaven,” and one that is sinful and corrupt, our earthly home. Yet, going back to Genesis, God not only made us in God’s image, God also ordered Creation itself to mirror divine perfection. It is through sin that this world became corrupted. How we think about these concepts has a great effect not only on our outlook, but our actions as well. If we think of this world as symbolic only of sin and corruption, and heaven as the solitary alternative, then our focus is largely on the individual self, concerned first and foremost with ensuring we have our own ticket off this world, and then, hopefully, ensuring others get their ticket as well. But then we tend to lose interest in the fate of this world and can develop tunnel vision only of the world to come.

That is the drawback of the choices our Brethren forebears made. By isolating themselves in insular groups, they withdrew from actively seeking to redeem the world around them, making sure they were living the way they needed to get their

own tickets to heaven. I'm sure they prayed for the redemption of others, but their focus was on themselves and their little individual communities of faith. The problem with that viewpoint is that it ignores the first part of probably the most quoted scripture of the Bible, John 3:16. We like to focus on the "shall not perish but have everlasting life" part, but we tend to forget the "For God so loved the world" part. As Jesus says in our scripture today, he was "not of this world" but he was sent to this world with a mission, to redeem God's creation in this world. Likewise, we now share that same mission. In Christ we no longer belong to the world that distances itself from God, that lives against God's will for us. We are in this world to redeem it. To seek to bring it back in line with the way God envisioned it, with the way Christ preached it should be. Jesus did seek to show us the way to salvation, but that salvation was more than just reciting the sinner's prayer. That salvation involved sacrifice, and serious work.

Like Jesus, we are servant leaders. Our commitment is in seeking to ensure that the abundant life God provides for is realized by all, not just a few. It's seeking to restore the perfect balance in nature that God designed, being true stewards of the bounty of nature, instead of scouring the land to feed our greed. It's showing hospitality to the stranger and treating the other as ourselves. It's a pretty big job in today's world, considering how far this world has strayed from God's plan; it's impossible for the individual disciple. But that's why Jesus prays for us to be of one community, to work together.

It's interesting that this prayer only appears in John's gospel, the last of the gospels to be written. One has to wonder if there were already tensions building

between the churches established by Peter, and by Paul, and John and the other apostles and evangelists. Were theological and doctrinal differences already dividing the young church? Was the writer of John inspired to include this prayer to help keep the focus on staying together as one body? It stresses the importance of this community set apart within the larger world community. The assembled disciples that are not of this world but have a mission in this world. It's through the Spirit present in community that we can bridge both worlds, the world that should reflect Christ and God's intentions in Christian community and the world that draws away from God, without finding ourselves torn in two. It's through the servant leadership and fellowship of that community that we find our way to be active in the world, but not of the world. It's through that community that we display an alternative to the values of the world that conflict with the values Jesus taught. Finally, it's through the combined strength of that community that we can change the corrupt structures and practices of the earthly world to restore God's created order, step by step.

I hope and pray we seek to be that community at work in this world, instead of choosing to sit idly by and wait to use our personal ticket out. The choice is ours.

Amen.

Hymn - In Christ there is no east or west – 306

Benediction:

Go forth as God's community

A community of action in this world

Seeking to restore God's creation

6

And living into the Way of Christ.

Amen