

Sent

John 17:6-19

There is something very tempting about escaping from the world. Travel agents, the tourist industry, and the real estate business know this. They spend millions to lure us to take luxury cruises where our every whim is met, to enjoy fractional ownership in condos at the shore, to buy a second home in the mountains, to live in a gated community where we can leave our workaday pressures behind. In fact every week as ask my husband, Leroy, if it is time for us to go on vacation yet! Although the images used to sell these retreats reflect our glitzy media world, our human desire for respite from the world and its incessant pressures is as ancient as the Bible.

Religious faith may even intensify the desire for escape from the world. Having glimpsed a vision of what is holy and good, the human spirit may hunger not for the promised splendor of luxury resorts, but for a community and a way of being that avoid the clamor and conflict of the world. The history of Christianity is filled with stories of such human arrangements: monasteries, convents, reform movements, communal living, utopias, retreat centers, small groups centered on prayer and piety, attempts to reclaim the practices of primitive Christianity as interpreted by charismatic leaders. While each of these developed its peculiar shape and ethos, all of them have been efforts to create a space, unencumbered by the world, that would allow for a fuller realization of a faithful, holy life.

It appears that the desire to live apart from the world arose in the community of John. By the end of the first century CE, as conflict with the authorities increased, the members of John's community were

understandably attracted to a life of faith that would disengage them from the powers that were opposed to the gospel. How good it would feel to retreat into their own group, to recall the stories of Jesus, to sense his presence in their meals of bread and wine, to enjoy each other's supportive fellowship, and no longer to have to defend their beliefs and practices in a hostile world.

The wisdom of John's sermon, delivered as the instruction of Christ, is this: it provides an alternative to retreat from world without giving into the pressures of the world. Again and again we read that Jesus and his disciples "do not belong to the world," that is to say, the world's claims do not shape their essential identity, faith, and values. But at the same time Christ is crystal clear that there is no escape from the reality of the world. He says, "I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves" (v. 13). Christ spoke to them in the same world where they lived and where they would find joy "in themselves" or, to provide another equally valid translation, "among themselves." Yes, they could be a community, and yes, they could find joy in that community, but no, the community was not to abandon the world. **Thomas H. Troeger**

Our scripture has been called the "high-priestly prayer." Many biblical commentators emphasize that this prayer is a model Jesus was teaching his disciples in that transitional period of separation that was leading to the cross and resurrection as culmination of his earthly ministry. As with the Lord's Prayer, Jesus was intentional in teaching how to pray to God and make intercession relevant. But this is also a "farewell prayer"; it conveyed again the concern for the disciples and their mission in the world modeled in Jesus' relationship to God. Jesus was praying to God in that divine relational community, asking for God's presence and guidance as the disciples, then

commissioned as future apostles, were sent to the world to witness to God's love and unity. The key element was that the disciples were in the world under God's protection (17:11).

Another important dimension in this text is the emphasis on abundant life (eternal life), which for John was more than existential, intellectual, biological, or mystical life. It was and is life in all its fullness and blessings: the life that comes from God and is the Word incarnate in the living Christ and witnessed in the world and human history (1:14; 17:2). These disciples were now called to a living faith in the world. The glory offered was the one that passes through the cross and was completed in the resurrection. For the church is that paradoxical reality expressed by Jesus in living out its mission: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one" (17:11 NIV).

John emphasized that the disciples were called, set apart, and sent into the world, as Jesus was sent by the Father into the world, in the midst of conflict and confusion. They are consecrated by the truth, trusting in faith in God's word (17:17-19). Believing and witnessing in the world means that the church as a community of faith is sent to live in a creative tension "in the world and not of the world." A prayerful community is sent to take seriously its intercessory role, in solidarity with the victims of injustice and marginalization, while denouncing the root causes of these unjust structures and broken relationships through its active witness in the lives of people and in the world.

Like the disciples we are sent to be witnesses to truth. We are called to a discipleship in solidarity and the promotion of true reconciliation. Today, more than ever, reclaiming the centrality of the truth of the gospel and living the gospel in truth are daring tasks. A search for the truth can lead to

controversial topics such as naming corruption, unveiling impunity, and unmasking idolatry in personal, communal, and systemic entities. **Carmelo Álvarez**

As if fearing that the congregation would not get the message straight, John reminded his listeners that Christ reiterated the point over and over: "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" (vv. 15-16). Instead of retreat from the world, Christ offered an alternative model that can empower the faith community, the church, to live in the world without succumbing to its values and pressures. We are to stay in the world under the protective care of God. We are to live amidst all of the knotted complexities of the world without ourselves getting entangled.

The holiness that they might have hoped to achieve by escape from the world was to be found not through disengagement but through the action of God and immersion in God's word: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (v. 17). I used to be afraid of the word "sanctify" because I thought it meant being out of control, shouting and rolling in the floor - but the word means "set apart." Christ recognized our desire to be holy but reoriented the direction of our yearnings, turning us to the truth of God's word that is revealed in the here and now of the world, as the disciples and we are sent into the world.

This plea to remain in the world rose to a crescendo as Christ prayed; "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (v. 18). This "sent *into* the world" is the exact opposite of getting *out* of the world. In one clean, clear verse Christ reminds the church that the pattern of his own

life was not escape from the world but engagement with the world, with all of its distorted powers and pressures.

John's sermon is a reminder for remaining in the world, addressed to a community that for good reason was exhausted by the world and ready to be done with it. We, like they, are exhausted with the world's ceaseless violence and corruption, and the frequent feelings of despair over the inability to make a difference. **Thomas H. Troeger**

However, Brothers and sisters, as much as I (we) want to go on vacation, separate ourselves from the world, Jesus calls us and sends us to be witnesses to the truth of God and Jesus Christ in this world. God has already promised to protect us...we have been sent...all we need now is to go.

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