

CHRIST PRAYS FOR HIS FOLLOWERS

John 17:6-19

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson,
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA

June 4, 2000

"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." John 17:9

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

John 17 is one of the most profound chapters of the Bible. Jesus has just given lengthy instructions to his disciples in the Upper Room and now he turns to God in prayer. It's the night he was betrayed. Within hours his disciples for whom he's praying will abandon him. In less than 24 hours he'll be dying on the cross. Yet Jesus turns his thought to God and prays for his disciples.

The gospels tell us that sometimes Jesus spent entire nights in prayer but this is the only prayer of any length which has been recorded. Jesus evidently prayed aloud. As a result, we're given the privilege of overhearing what he prayed. The portion of the prayer we're dealing with today focuses on his apostles. He's praying specifically for the apostles, but we can easily apply what he prays to us.

Underlying his prayer is the belief that there are two distinct human communities: the church and the world. Jesus prays, "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world." The larger community Jesus calls "the world" or what we call "secular society." The other and smaller community he calls "those whom the Father has given him out of the world," the church. "I am not praying for the world" he says, "but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours." So here are two communities clearly contrasted to one another: the church and the world.

The story of the Bible is a tale of these two communities, a tale of two cities. Recently I've been reading St. Augustine's classic, *The City of God*. He wrote in the early 5th century when the Roman Empire was reeling on the ropes; attacked by barbarians. The Empire had lasted for over 500 years. Once it held undisputed control of the entire Mediterranean world. But when St. Augustine wrote, the Empire was falling apart. England was lost. Gaul was

convulsed with repeated Barbarian invasions. Barbarians were pouring over the Rhine inundating the Empire. Vandals were attacking the walls of the city in North Africa where Augustine was writing. The empire was unraveling. Within a generation the Western half of the Empire would fall and Western civilization enter the Dark Ages.

Pagans blamed Christians for the fading empire. People had stopped worshipping pagan gods and turned to Christ. The gods were angry and had abandoned Rome. Augustine refuted these charges. He said there've always been two kingdoms, two cities in the world. The City of God which will grow and grow until it encompasses the whole earth. And the secular City which will eventually be destroyed. So Augustine wrote to recruit men and women for the City of God. Augustine's conception of the two cities stems in part from the prayer of Jesus. Jesus prays, not for the world, but for us who have come to trust in him.

First, Jesus says of us who trust in him that we don't belong to the world. We belong to God. Last week I stood at the bedside of Dee Walters. I said, "Dee, you belong to Christ whether you live or die." When my sons were younger I'd put my arms around them before they went out on a date. I'd say, "Remember to whom you belong." They knew what I meant. They belong to me and Kay. But they also belong to Christ. They didn't always want to be reminded. They sometimes wanted to belong to themselves. But Jesus reminds us that we belong to him. That makes a difference in how we live and what we do and what we say and how we say it.

Second, Jesus recognizes we're in the world. Jesus prayed, "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world." We're in the world, but we don't belong to it. We have a major responsibility to remain in it as Christ's representatives and to make Christ known to others. Keep these two characteristics of the church in mind. We belong to God not to the world but we live in the world.

As we keep those two characteristics in mind we can appreciate Christ's prayer for us. He prays two things for us. First, he prays for us to be protected. The world's a dangerous place to live in. So Jesus prays, "protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one." In other words, keep them together. Unprotected, we scatter. Statistics show that new church members

who don't become involved in the life of the church will most likely drift away. One way God protects us from becoming swallowed up by the world is by keeping us together in the church. I urge you to encourage our new members to become involved in different ways according to their gifts, talents and interests.

Christ also prays for us to be protected from the evil one. He wants us to remain in the world without succumbing to the world's values like *winning at any cost, the ends justify the means, me first*. Jesus wants us to be like him, in the world, but not of it. He was a friend of sinners. Sinners and unchurched people loved Jesus. They flocked to him. And yet there was no sin in him. So Jesus wants us to love those outside the church. That involves risks, great risks. So Jesus prays for us to be guarded from the evil one as we live in the world.

The Christian attitude to the world should not be one of withdrawal, on the one hand, or conformity, on the other hand. We withdraw from the world when we refuse to discuss and deal with the controversial issues in the world like the sexual, racial, social and political crises of our time. We withdraw from the world when we try to separate ourselves from people who don't believe and act like we do. On the other hand, we become conformed to the world when we just go along with the evil in the world. One of my favorite twentieth century writers was Albert Camus. Camus was not a believer. He was an atheist. But he was a good man whom I wish had been a Christian. He once took Christians to task for our complicity in the death of six million Jews in the holocaust. Why were Christians silent in the face of this evil? Why did we just go along with the evil? Why didn't we do more to stop it? Why did so many ministers and priests say, "The church shouldn't get involved in social issues."

So Christ prays for believers. He doesn't want us to withdraw from the world and its problems. He wants us to live in the world and to change the world - protected by our involvement in Christian fellowship. Protected from the evil that he wants us to battle against in the world.

The second thing that Jesus prays is that we continue his mission in the world. He prays, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Jesus calls our church

and individuals to mission. Heal the sick. Eat and drink with sinners. Call people to repentance. Tell them about Jesus and how we're made right with God through faith in Christ.

Every Christian is called to be a missionary. A missionary is not just someone who goes to another country to tell people about Jesus, but someone who knows God has given each one of us a mission wherever we are. We grow as Christians when we minister. I challenge all of us to volunteer for our next short term mission trip to Philadelphia on July 5, 6, and 7. We'll be working on a Habitat for Humanity project. It's close, yet far enough to give us a feel for another culture and way of life. I challenge you - young and old, take three days off and join us. You don't need skills as long as you can stand around with a hammer in your hand. Jesus prayed for us to be involved in mission. Involvement in mission, witness and service keeps the church both in the world and not of the world, both worldly and holy.

I close with a quote from British scholar and theologian, C.K. Barrett. "The only hope for the world is that it should cease to be the world... and become, like the disciples, the property of God and Christ."