

Seventh Sunday in Easter  
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Church of the Savior - Episcopal  
Orange City, Iowa

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### For the World

AS YOU HAVE SENT ME INTO THE WORLD, SO I HAVE SENT THEM INTO THE WORLD. JOHN 17.18

When I was growing up in an obscure sect which prided itself on its orthodoxy, I learned that some things were plainly *sinful*, like telling lies or swearing, and other things were plainly *spiritual*, like reading your Bible and praying. But there was an extensive intermediate zone of things which, while not really sinful, were *worldly*. Worldly things were not exactly prohibited, but you were supposed to avoid them, because they could easily lead to sin. So, for instance, while drinking, dancing, smoking and popular music were not in themselves sinful, they were certainly worldly and not for the serious Christian. And worldly *people*—anyone who was not, by our rather narrowly focused lights, a Christian, no matter how good they might appear to be—were best left to their own devices except when being friends with them served the ulterior purpose of witnessing to them. Our calling was to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. Too much of an attachment to anything, or to anyone, not clearly connected to the Christian faith was cause for concern that you were worldly, not just putting up with the world but part of it, loving it, and thus not right with God.

In today's lesson from John's Gospel, Jesus, like the community that spawned me, is concerned with our relation to the *world*. The Greek word is *cosmos*; it occurs thirteen times in this short

passage, and once more in the two verses I added. The perspective of John's Gospel, commencing with its magisterial prologue:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...*

is, if anything, *cosmic*, inviting us to hear God's word in the context of the ancients' big religious and philosophical ideas. The idea that we inhabit a *cosmos* (τον κοσμον) is central in ancient thought. We attribute to the earliest Greek philosophers, to pre-socratics like Pythagoras, the discovery that the world is not just a collection of things, but an ordered, unified reality, an "identity in difference", a "one in the many," an integral, rational whole the human mind can grasp. Therein lies the beginning of philosophy and science. But it wasn't much of a move to start thinking of this *cosmos* as eternal and divine, self-explanatory and self-sufficient, complete on its own. An idea, it turns out, with staying power. Long after Pythagoras, the late, great Carl Sagan famously intoned (as Vangelis wells up in the background):

The Cosmos is all that there is or ever was or ever will be. Our feeblest contemplations of the Cosmos stir us—there is a tingling in the spine, a catch in the voice, a faint sensation, as if a distant memory, of falling from a height. We know we are approaching the greatest of mysteries.

The New Testament challenges this. The cosmos is the world, but not the world contemplated with wonder and awe; it's the human world seen for what it is: a creation fallen into tragedy and disarray. A creation which, given the chance, would unmake its maker. It's the world which cannot abide what does not belong to it, what reveals that it is not all in all. The cosmos is precisely what cannot stomach Jesus, who unmask its religion as rebellion, its righteousness as sin, its wisdom as folly, and its power as weakness. The cosmos is where Jesus, judged and condemned, so plainly guilty of blasphemy and sedition, must be disposed of.

Here in John, as Jesus and his disciples linger, their last supper eaten together, Jesus inserts a prayer into his long farewell. The religious and political machinery which will condemn and kill Jesus is moving; Judas has gone out into the night on his mission of betrayal. Jesus has a very good idea of the horror that awaits him. Yet he prays not for himself, but for his disciples, those he now calls his friends (15.15). He prays for their protection. The world will hate them, because they do not belong to it. They belong to Jesus because God gave them to him. Yet Jesus sends them into the world, just as God the Father sends him into the world. Of course, in letting them hear this, Jesus at the same time commissions them; he sends them into the world as he was sent into the world. Despite the negative light in which the world is cast, and the talk of the world hating Jesus and his disciples, the critical fact is that Jesus sends them into the world *for* the world: “...so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (17.21) In light of this, whatever concerns we might have about being *in* the world or *of* the world are drastically off the mark if we’re not first—and last—asking what is it to be *for* the world, to be sent into it, like Jesus, for its sake. Not to condemn it, not to peel off refugees to escape it for some pure and heavenly realm, but to *save* it.

Hear Jesus’ prayer in the fraught setting where John portrays it, and the disconnect of word and reality is striking. *Who’s* being sent into the world as Jesus was sent into the world? These uncomprehending, unreliable guys sitting around the remains of the meal. Earlier in the evening, a disciple implores, “*Show us the Father and that will be enough for us!*” Jesus says, “*Don’t you know me...even after such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!*” (14.8-9). Despite everything they’ve been through together, they still have only the dimmest understanding of who Jesus is. And Jesus knows how things are going to go. He’s going out into the night where, for the sake of the world, to save it from itself, he will give himself into its bloody hands. His disciples will follow him out into the darkness, but they will try to save

themselves, to run, to deny, to hide. And yet, knowing this, Jesus says, “*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world...so that the world may believe that you have sent me*” (17.18 & 21).

With the absurd difference in view between Jesus, sent by God into the world, and the disciples Jesus sends into the world, what he asks on their behalf is surprising. He doesn't pray that they will finally understand who he is, or that they will acquire the courage to do his work. Clueless and cowardly they may be, but Jesus' prayer is that they will be *one*. He returns to the overriding theme of his farewell address, his command for them to love one another. Indeed, we have to realize that Jesus doesn't even pray that the disciples will love *God*. Belgian priest Louis Evely once wrote, “Jesus promised the conversion of the world, not if we love God (this anyone can claim, and no one can verify), but if we realize the miracle, exceedingly rare but unquestionable, of loving one another” (*The Christian Spirit*, 91).

The prayer for unity among followers of Jesus is, I think, always perilously close to being misheard, to being transposed into something deeply opposed to it. For it's easy to take it as meaning solidarity among those of us who have the truth and do what's right, over against all the outsiders. It's easy to mistake the loyalty which jealously guards the group's integrity and identity for the love Jesus insists we have for one another. But that's not what he's talking about. He's talking about the love which accepts the other person without being much concerned with whether she gets her beliefs right, the love which forgives the other person without being much concerned with what he's done, and what he's done to merit being forgiven for it. That is, Jesus tells his disciples to love one another precisely as he has loved them, and as God has loved the world. That world is still the world, the cosmos is still the cosmos, the systematic rejection of God, and yet, as John tells us earlier in the book, “*God so loved the world*

(*τον κοσμον*), *that he gave his only begotten son*" (3.16). The world hates God but God loves the world. And God, being God, gets the last word.

Jesus prays that God the Father will protect them from the "evil one" (17.15). The term here is generic, but personified, the evil one is the "accuser" (*Satan*) and the "divider" (*Diablos*, the Devil). Jesus sends his friends into the world, praying that they be kept safe from mutual accusation and the division that ensues. Like Jesus, sent by God not to condemn the world but to save, Jesus sends them—he sends us—to do his work of reconciliation.

We look for God's grand plan to save the world, but all we see is this unpromising collection of losers sitting together for a meal, together only because in some dim way they see in Jesus the human face of God and have, however hesitantly, thrown in their lot with him, setting out on the impossible path of loving as he loves us, forgiving as he forgives us. Louis Evely muses, "*I often say to myself that, in our religion, God must feel very much alone: for is there anyone besides God who believes in the salvation of the world? God seeks among us sons and daughters who resemble him enough, who love the world enough that he could send them into the world to save it*" (96).

That unlikely calling brings to my mind Raymond Carver's short story, "A Small, Good Thing:" One Saturday Ann goes to the bakery to order a birthday cake for her son Scotty. His name, a space ship, stars and planets will be on it. His tenth birthday will be Monday. But on Monday morning, as he walks to school Scotty steps into an intersection and is hit by a car. Knocked down and dazed, Scotty seems not to be badly hurt. He goes home, tells his mother what happened. He seems fine, but suddenly passes out. She calls her husband, Howard, and rushes her son to the hospital. The party is cancelled, the cake forgotten at the bakery. Hours pass. The doctors find no signs of serious injury; they reassure the parents, but the boy doesn't wake up. Monday night passes. The doctors, now beginning to be concerned, still try to

reassure the parents. Scotty should wake up at any moment. But he doesn't. More tests. Tuesday. Ann and her husband are distraught. They stay at their unconscious son's bedside as much as they can, one or another going home only briefly and reluctantly, to feed the dog, to call relatives, before hurrying back to the hospital. When either goes home, even in the middle of the night, the phone rings; it's the baker, angry about the expensive cake that has not been picked up or paid for. Neither distracted parent manages to focus on the fact that they've stiffed the baker. They don't know who this threatening, abusive caller is. Back at the hospital, Scotty slides into a coma. There are X-rays and brain scans, but no explanation. Ann and Howard are frantic; the calls at home only add to their confusion and fear. Scotty dies. The doctors are apologetic. It was a one-in a million chance, a hidden occlusion. The broken parents come home. Sitting there in the awful silence, the phone rings. Ann picks it up on the first ring:

"Hello," she said... "Hello!" she said. "For God's sake," she said. "Who is this? What is it you want?"

"Your Scotty, I got him ready for you," the man's voice said. "Did you forget him?"

"You evil bastard!" she shouted into the receiver. "How can you do this, you evil son of a bitch?"

"Scotty," the man said. "Have you forgotten about Scotty?" Then the man hung up on her.

Long past midnight, when they have finally fallen asleep, there's another call. Again, Ann is enraged. She realizes who the caller is:

Drive me down to the shopping center, Howard.

What are you saying?

The shopping center. I know who it is who's calling. I know who it is. It's the baker, the son-of-a-bitch baker. I had him bake a cake for Scotty's birthday. That's who's calling. That's who has the number and keeps calling us. To harass us about that cake. The baker, that bastard.

They go out into the night to drive to the shopping center and find the baker. Ann angrily confronts him:

My son's dead, she said with a cold, even finality. He was hit by a car Monday morning. We've been waiting with him until he died.

The baker crumples under the weight of shame and guilt. He pleads,

I'm not an evil man, I don't think. Not evil like you said on the phone. Please...let me ask if you can find in your hearts to forgive me?

Ann's rage dissipates, lost in a sea of grief. The baker invites them to sit. He gives them bread and coffee.

"Smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich."

They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread.

It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.

The story concludes with this Eucharistic meal, with those who by rights should be enemies sitting together, breaking bread, reconciled, united in loss and hope, the life of God taking flesh for a shattered world, the world to which Jesus sends us.

Amen.