

Not Without Peril

Wayne Waibel – 05/12/2024

How is it that we are sent into the world, and yet – like Jesus Himself – are not of the world? Interesting little paradox, don't you think?

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On this seventh Sunday of Easter, we also mark the day as Ascension Sunday - the symbolic day of Christ's ascension out of this world into the next. And next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday - the day the Holy Spirit was poured out to the waiting disciples, so they could begin their mission to proclaim the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

After next Sunday, we settle back into what the church calls "ordinary time," which extends until we start ramping up for Christmas with the season of Advent.

I think it's safe to say that we really do not have an ordinary time any longer. The church may still label it as such on the calendar, but we have long since departed from the ordinary in any real sense. The church as a community of faith lives in the creative tension of the world, and yet is not of the world.

Christ's presence will allow us to live vitally and faithfully in the world – not owned by it, but fully engaged with its needs and wounds, and energized by the truth of God's word, by the One who was sent into the world that we all might have a more abundant life.

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The world is a hostile place to those who dedicate themselves to God. In part, because the truth of God's word is revealed in the here and now of the world.

Nothing puts you in the cross hairs of worldly evil quicker than speaking truth to power. And when you are commanded to love one another, the truth is your guiding force.

Knowing this is probably what inspired Jesus to render His intercessory prayer as part of the final discourse. He fully understood the tribulation that would follow His disciples being sent into the world.

And we are included in that directive. Ours is not a passive role. Peaceful – yes, but not without peril.

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Love operates in an environment where the priority of God's testimony is found in weakness. For the first disciples, sanctification in the Truth and Word was both a matter of what God does for us in Christ and what we experience in being sent into the world as messengers of that Word, and disciples who love one another, even to the point of laying down their lives. Hence the prayer from Jesus that they – and we – might be protected so that we may love as we have been commanded to love.

This prayer is many things: reflections on His imminent departure, a summation of the previous years of ministry, a call to spiritual struggle and commitment – but most of all – a prayer for someone who loves His followers deeply. To this day – those realities remain unchanged.

And the reason they (the disciples) and we, are carrying the love of the Lord for us into a world that doesn't know God is precisely that God loves that world, and wants that world to know that love. And that is why we are at once humbled and grateful to be fulfilling such a noble command.

Before you start thinking, "Now hold on there – I do not possess the extraordinary qualifications such a mission would entail," remember that God is at work in the midst of our decisions, and He will make a way for people of resurrection to rise. Ordinary people like you and me - and Simon Peter - and the Apostle Paul - have carried the extraordinary gospel from one generation to the next.

The challenge facing the church today is to be careful not to place issues of structure above the mission of the church. I know we don't have to wrestle with that demon in this place, but we need to avail ourselves to other communities of faith that do struggle with such things.

Have a look at John 17:18 sometime, and notice that 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. Putting yourself in a position to assist carries a degree of risk, but that is our calling, and our joy.

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Eternal life has already begun for those who live in joy and fellowship with God. It is when we recognize God's life-giving Spirit among us that we see the eternal life we already have. Believers can know they have passed from death to life because they love one another. Eternal life in this sense has to do with a quality of existence that death cannot destroy.

Will we allow the dictates and foibles of the secular world with all its trappings, chaos, and clamor to determine the path we are to follow, or will we, as a people, embark on a new journey that finds our steps guided by the defining principles of a faith that promises life eternal?

If eternal life is a call to authentic human existence in the world, a full life, now and in the world to come – then we will surely trust that God in Christ Jesus is a God who continually makes a way. And though that way is not without peril, we can be certain that our comfort and joy is assured. Amen.