

Title: Sent Into The World  
Text: John 17: 11 – 18  
Date: May 13, 2018

I told you that our scripture passage last week was but a small portion of what is known as Jesus' Farewell Discourse that was given at the conclusion of the Last Supper, the night before his crucifixion. Today's passage is also a part of that extended farewell. We instinctively know that anyone's last words warrant special attention.

I tend to be a fan of the Gospel of John, and so I speak as a friendly witness when I mention a note of concern in this passage – a thought that I wish John might have worded a bit differently.

From time to time we hear Christians say that **"we are called to be in the world, but not of the world."** Have you heard that? You can clearly trace that thought to this passage this morning. Jesus said, referring to his disciples, **"they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world . . ."** (John 17: 14-15) The concern lies in what it means to be "in" or "of" the world.

This is an issue for me because I am bothered by what looks like Christians who are so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly good. I am worried when people set up a false dichotomy between the realm of the spirit, and the realm of the flesh. Sadly, many Christians buy into this false narrative. Because of their lofty vision of the spiritual realm, they figure concern for global warming is relatively petty. Because of their interest in saving souls, addressing systematic poverty is a distraction at best.

Now I believe that with sufficient footnotes, we might be able to give John a pass. After all, it is this same John who also said in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . ."** (3:16) How can the world be subject to our disdain, if God *loved* the world so? And the final verse we read today is quite clear. In Jesus' conversation with God he says, **"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."** (17:18) *This* is the verse that I hope sinks into today. Our God is a God who sends, and we too have been and are being sent into the world.

This is especially timely for us to reflect on today as we receive new members. Shepherdstown Presbyterian is not a place for us to withdraw from the world. If anything, all that do – even our time of worship – is part of equipping us to be more meaningfully and compassionately engaged in the world. Our starting point is a recognition of the inherent goodness in Creation, and so we are sent into the world both to celebrate and to reclaim this Original Goodness, rather than being fearful of getting our hands dirty.

Now I know this sounds a little abstract, but I think we fall short when it remains in the realm of an abstraction. I was struck by this when preparing for the class that I am teaching on the Confession of Belhar. When we think of our Confessions of Faith we tend to think of abstractions, and the playground of those who adore wordsmithing. At the Synod of Belhar, however, the starting point was the harsh, harsh realities of apartheid in South Africa. Rather than abstractions, the starting point was total lack of dignity and frequent funerals in a police state.

Some history. After the National Party gained power in South Africa in 1948, its all-white government immediately began enforcing existing policies of racial segregation under a system of legislation that it called apartheid. Under apartheid, nonwhite South Africans (the majority of the population) would be forced to live in separate areas from whites and use separate public facilities, and contact between the two groups would be limited.

A parallel movement had been going on even in the church that began years earlier. As South Africa developed, there were two targets in the missionary enterprise. First, churches for *settlers* were established along the familiar lines of theologies and structures of the churches in their countries of origin. Second, missionary societies established churches among those whom they were converting to Christianity. So, as missionaries went to different geographical areas, or to differing tribes and social classes, church structures divided along practical lines, creating economic, tribal and racial separations.

In 1829, some rural Dutch churches specifically asked for separate facilities and services. Initially the answer was no for theological reasons, but by the mid-19th century church officials reversed their earlier decision. So the church now permitted division – separation – along racial lines. But, ominously, what started as *permission* eventually became a legally enforced policy, not only in the church, but in society as well.

Over the decades the separation and enforced inequities became increasingly extreme and harsh. Somehow the white minority was able to maintain power while keeping indigenous ethnic groups at odds with one another. Many rules were also arbitrary. While they thought there was clarity along the white / black divide, they then had to figure out what to do with Asians, for example. Eventually they decided to categorize Chinese as Blacks, and Japanese as Whites. Does that make any sense? Only if you are trying to cultivate Japan as a trading partner!

Eventually a minority of thinking Christians decided that they could not take it any longer. Beyond it being a civil rights issue, they rightly understood this to be a theological crisis. In the letter accompanying the Confession of Belhar they wrote:

**“We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the Church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. . .**

**As solemnly as we are able, we hereby declare . . . that our only motive lies in our fear that the truth and power of the gospel itself is threatened in this situation.**

**We proclaim it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion which threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country. . . We are deeply aware of the deceiving nature of such a false doctrine and know that many who have been conditioned by it have to a greater or lesser extent learnt to take a half-truth for the whole.”**

So rather than ivory tower abstractions, these faith statements were asserted with absolute passion, and a conviction that we are sent into this world as agents of reconciliation. Not only were there a series of assertions, but these clarifying assertions led to a need to reject, and take a stand against other principles.

For example, the Confession asserts that this primal, God-given reality of **“unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ . . . a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought.”**

Skipping ahead, we read, **“Therefore, we reject any doctrine which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.”**

There is something profoundly empowering when we are able to assert what we stand for. There is something profoundly empowering when we are able to declare what we will not tolerate. There is something profoundly empowering when we realize that this has everything to do with the here and now, rather than some distant abstraction.

I trust it is obvious that when we claim something as part of our Confessions, we are not talking about a truth that is unique to South Africa. The kernel of truth that was grasped in South Africa is just as potent in the United States, in Myanmar, in Syria, or El Salvador.

When I feel paralyzed by fear of what is unfolding in our country, and overwhelmed by the enormity of the tasks that confront us, and the courage they will require of us, I find hope and some comfort (not to mention a much-needed kick in the butt) in these famous words of Archbishop Oscar Romero, martyred in El Salvador in 1980:

**“It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.**

**The Kingdom [sic] is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us. . .**

**This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results...**

**We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”**

God so loved the world, that He sent his Son, the Beloved. The Beloved does not ask that we be removed from the world, but that we might be protected from the evil one. As the Beloved was sent into the world, so too are we sent into the world. This is what we are about. We love the world!

And while we did pass a Voting Rights Act back in 1965, when police are still being called on people of color in Starbucks in Philadelphia, and on a sleeping Black grad student at Yale University, and on Black friends at an Airbnb in California, it is clear that deep, deep work remains. *This* is the world that we are sent into as agents of reconciliation.

Grateful for the gift of the Confession of Belhar, being clear that these truths born of suffering relate to our context, perceiving that there is power in clarifying principles - especially in the context of a committed faith community - I would now ask that we unite our voices in the responsive “Affirmation of Reconciliation” found in your bulletin insert.

Amen

**John 17: 11 – 18**

<sup>11</sup> And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. <sup>12</sup> While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. <sup>13</sup> But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. <sup>14</sup> I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>15</sup> I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup> They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.