

*Sermon for 7 Easter, Year B  
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Holy Nativity, Plano  
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I once had a teacher who asked my class a very searching question. He said, “Are you an American Christian, or a Christian American?” Now that may seem like a trivial question, or it may seem like a trick question. You may be thinking, “What’s the difference?” Well, the difference is one of priorities and identity. In other words, which association is more important to you? Are you first and foremost an American, who just so happens to also be a Christian? Or are you first and foremost a Christian, who also (thank the Lord) happens to be an American? Does the kingdom of heaven have the first claim on our lives? Or does it take a back seat to the tongues and tribes and nations of this world?

It’s not just a question for Americans. It is a question for all Christians, because the proper answer is clear, isn’t it? We are citizens of heaven first, and only afterward are we American, or English, or Chilean, or Sudanese, or Caribbean, or Texan, or anything else we might call ourselves. Otherwise, if the claims of Christ don’t precede all others, then, in a crucial sense, we are not truly Christians at all.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus prays for his disciples: “Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou has given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.” The name of God is God’s revelation of himself, and God’s presence with them. All disciples of Jesus are brought into the presence and the life of God, sharing this divine life with each other just as the Father and the Son share it with each other. We are caught up into the very life of the Holy Trinity by being in Christ.

But of course that has consequences for our engagement with the world. Because we share in the divine life, Jesus says that we are “not of the world, even as [he] is not of the world.” You see, the world cannot share in the divine life, because it is governed by the one who has rejected God. Anything that is “of the world” or worldly is ultimately under the rule of the evil one.

That doesn’t mean that God hates the world, only that the world hates God and has rejected him. The Father and the Son don’t abandon the world. In their love, they continue to confront it and call it to repentance. And therefore, we cannot abandon the world either. We also have to confront it with the love that we find in the life of God that we share. The world will continue to hate us, but some may find themselves drawn to the love of God and join us in being in the world only, not of the world.

What Jesus prays for us is that we would be “sanctified” or “consecrated” “in the truth”. Those are fancy words that simply mean to “make holy”. And holiness is about separation. God is holy, because he is totally separate from the creation. He is set apart. And we are sanctified when we are set apart to experience God’s presence, when we are set apart for God’s service, and when we are set apart to be the people of God, distinct from all other people. The more holy we are, the more sanctified we become, the more the world will hate us. But Jesus sends us into the world, just as the Father sent him into the world. Our very existence must be a challenge to the world and its rejection of God.

So here is the million dollar question: Are we really separate from the world? Can anyone, looking at us, see that we are different? Does our life together really show forth the divine life that we supposedly share? Do we even have a life together? Or are do we really just gather on Sundays and occasional other days for our own purposes when it suits us? Does the world really hate us?

I submit to you that we are really much more like Judas than we suppose. We are fellow travelers with Jesus, but we do not share in his divine life. We call him Lord, but we are not submitted to his will. We do not love the world as God loves the world, with challenge, and confrontation, and calls to repentance. Instead, we are co-opted by the world and seduced by the devil’s dominion. We do not distinguish ourselves from the world. We chase all kinds of idols that we think will give us purpose, or pleasure, or power. And we largely ignore the claims of God’s love on our lives. If we do not wake from our worldly dream, we may very well end as “sons of destruction”, lost in a “field of blood”.

And yet this isn’t God’s will for any of us. Jesus has given us God’s word of truth, so that we “may have [his] joy fulfilled” in us. God has given us the purpose of reaching out to the world with his love and truth. He has given us the pleasure of eternal life in his Son. He has given us the power to call upon him, knowing that whatever we ask according to his will he will grant us.

And all it will take to live this joyful existence is accept the life that God holds out to us in Jesus, to stand apart from the world with him, and to withstand the cowardly bullying of the world and its master, knowing that the love of God is many times stronger than the hatred that is opposed to him.