



“Out of This World”

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John 17:6-19

Today is Mother’s Day. It’s a day when many of us remember the numerous things we’ve learned from our moms.

My mother taught me religion. She used to say things like, “You better pray that comes out of the carpet.” My mother taught me medicine: “If you don’t stop crossing your eyes like that, they’re going to freeze that way.” My mother taught me how to be a contortionist: “Will you look at the dirt on the back of your neck!” My mother taught me to appreciate a job well done: “If you and your brother are going to kill each other, do it outside. I just finished cleaning!” My mother taught me about genetics: “You are just like your father!” My mother taught me logic: “Because I said so, that’s why.”¹

Anyone relate? In all seriousness, there’s one thing I know about my mother and many other mothers or mother-figures is that they pray for us every day. We need praying people in our lives. Let me tell you about a young woman who became one of the most important women in the history of the church simply because of her faithfulness as a mother who prayed. Her name was Monica. Monica was born in 331 B.C.E in North Africa in what is now known as Algeria. As a young girl, Monica converted to Christianity, which was still a relatively new faith. Her parents, who were not particularly religious and not in agreement with her new faith, married her off to a Roman and non-Christian named Patricius. Both Patricius and his mother, who lived with them, were hot-tempered people and difficult to deal with. While Monica’s prayers and Christian deeds bothered Patricius, he respected her beliefs and not long before his death, both he and his mother converted to Christianity.

Monica and Patricius had three children, two of whom entered religious life as young adults. The third was a son named Augustine. Augustine was more of a challenge. By his own admission he was a wayward youth, giving in to most of the pleasures of his day. One writer described him as lazy and uncouth. But Monica kept praying for her son. Her watchful, prayerful persistence paid off when Augustine finally became a Christian. Monica lived to see her son baptized into the faith before she died shortly thereafter. This praying mother couldn’t have known that Augustine would go on to become one of the towering figures of the church of his time, a man whom we now generally refer to as St. Augustine.²

¹ Adapted from the Internet - Unknown

² Michal Stawicki and Jeannie Ingraham, *99 Perseverance Success Stories: Encouragement for Success in Every Walk of Life* (Kindle Edition).

Not only do we recognize the prayers of mothers and mother-figures on this Mother's Day, the scripture reading for today focuses on the fact that Jesus prayed for his disciples and Jesus prayed for the world. Jesus was a praying person. What we don't see in the beginning of this 17th chapter of John is that all of the words from the text today represent Jesus in the act of prayer. The first few verses of this chapter show that Jesus, after saying some words, looked up into heaven and began to say a prayer. And in order to clearly understand Jesus, we need to remember that he was consistently in prayer, whether it be on a mountaintop, in a home, in a crowd, in a garden, or on a cross. Jesus prayed. Here again in John 17, Jesus is praying. And we begin to see that Jesus prayed in earnest in his final days. He prayed in anguish to God. He prayed for his people. He prayed for the world.

And this isn't even Jesus' last prayer. But it's the last prayer the disciples actually heard. When he prayed in agony, "Let this cup pass from me – yet not my will but your will be done," the disciples eyes were heavy and they fell asleep; and when Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" the disciples had indeed forsaken him, fearing for their own safety, and did not hear the pleading prayer of Christ.

The disciples just couldn't seem to make sense of what Jesus was trying to accomplish and the dreadful fate that would befall him. Which makes Jesus' prayer in John 17 all the more poignant. The disciples, through Jesus' ministry, had asked him to teach them how to pray, how to harness the power of God to do miraculous works. The disciples wanted in on Jesus' powerful prayer life. But during the long last night after supper, after Jesus washed his disciples' feet and spoke of the comfort of the Holy Spirit, Jesus began to pray. But Jesus wasn't teaching them to pray so that they would know the magic words once he was gone. No, he was praying for them, with them, right in front of them. Danielle Shroyer calls it "the divine hand-off prayer." Jesus was praying that the disciples' experience of life without him and their connection with God would be something special, something out of this world.

But Jesus didn't want the disciples to be totally out of this world. He didn't want them to totally not belong to this world. He hoped they would be united with the world, in the world, seeking to change it, and carry Jesus' teachings of the Kingdom of God to the places of hurt, loneliness, suffering, marginalization, and despair. The world needed these spirit-filled disciples. And so, Jesus prayed to God for his disciples in verse six and he referred to them as the ones whom God gave to him "out of the world." The verse says, "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."

"Out of the world." The word for world in ancient Greek is cosmos and is used seventy-eight times in the Gospel of John and thirteen times in our scripture for today alone. This is compared to fifteen times total that cosmos is used in the other three Gospels combined. So, it seems that the "world" is a near and important reality for the author of the Gospel of John. But what do we do with the fact that Jesus prayed that the disciples a part of the world and came out of the world? Well, for starters, the disciples and all people were created from the dust of the ground and are examples of God's creation. Since the disciples had been given life from the dirt and the mud and the earth as created beings, they are called by God and beckoned by Jesus to love

everything God has created. They are called from the earth and are asked to tend to all that the world contains.

Also, we hear the term “world” or cosmos, as a term of wonder in the way that Antoine de Saint-Exupéry uses “the world” in *The Little Prince*, when the fox says to the Prince, “You are unique in all the world to me...” If we see the world in that way, Jesus could be saying – with wonder – that “out of all the world, these unique and wonderful disciples are the ones whom you have given me.” Followers of Jesus have a responsibility as ones created from the world to make the troubles of the world better.

And we see that the world is full of troubles because later in our scripture lesson, Jesus didn’t want his disciples to be part of such an evil world. In verses 14 and 16, cosmos is used with a negative participle. “Do NOT belong to the world.” The world is a bad place filled with dangers, empires, and temptations that would cause the disciples to neglect their new mission as representatives of the Kingdom of God. In that sense, for God to give Jesus disciples “out of the world” might indicate that discipleship is liberation from those structures and destructive ways of living and being. Like most preachers we’ve heard growing up who would say, “We must be in the world but not of the world.”

But we are earth people, dirt people. We were created from the stuff of the earth. When we were prayed for by Jesus and accepted the mantle of spirit-filled disciples of Christ, we became out of this world people who were birthed from creation who seek to be co-creators of a new and better world free of hate, violence, and selfishness. By following Jesus, we do recognize that being in this world can be a struggle. We might feel weak and tired, we might feel lost and lonely, we might feel heartbroken and hurting, but we are indeed out of this world. We have been prayed for by the divine and we are spirit-filled resurrected people seeking to continue the bodily work of Christ right now, today.

I don’t think it is a coincidence that today is also Ascension Sunday, when Jesus finally leaves the world. And although Jesus is no longer in the world, we are. Although Jesus would ascend to God leaving the disciples standing around, we have work to do. Although the disciples were left staring at the clouds with their mouths agape, wondering what to do next, we know what we are called to do. Although the surviving disciples had tears streaming down their faces as an immense sadness hung over them, we must rise out of the earth and rise from our sadness and make people’s joy complete. Although we, like the disciples, probably feel alone and on our own down here with Jesus not among us in this world, we remember that we are not abandoned, that God and we are one, and that our mission is out of this world.

And I know we wish Jesus’ body, his abiding physical presence, was still on this earth. But he isn’t. Yet, as we talked about last week, he abides with us. We know that the power of Jesus was sent into the world, a world that John’s Gospel seemed to think was in opposition to God, yet he abides with us. Jesus dwelt among his own people and they did not recognize him, yet he abides with us. Jesus was part of this world, but was soon taken away from the world, yet he abides with us. Remember what the author of John said at the beginning of the Gospel, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, abided with us!”

And because Jesus abided with us, he also knew that the world was out to get him and that the world was filled with hatred. And he was aware that abiding in the world would mean he would get caught up in the hurt and pain and frustration and struggle. And so, he came with one mission, and one mission only, to spread the Kingdom of God, the law of love, all over the world. He lived the teaching of God's love in word and action. He lived to cast out demons. He lived to heal the sick. He lived to raise the dead. He lived to restore community and renew people's lives. He lived to question worldly authorities, be they religious or political. And he lived to point people back to the world's Creator, the one with whom he had a unique and pervasive unity.

Jesus' abiding life was an outpouring of God's love for this world and all of God's people. And despite ending in rejection and death, despite being taken out of the world, Jesus prayed. That is why Jesus' prayer was not a prayer to take the disciples OUT OF this world but to send them INTO this world protected by God's love and knowing God's complete joy. And we too become the body of Christ in the world here and now. Jesus' body is no longer here, but Jesus' body is very much here. WE are the body of Christ. Teresa of Avila said "Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out on a hurting world, yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good; yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

And so, as we go and be the hands, the heart, the feet of Christ, let us go this week remembering for what Jesus prayed. Not that it will be easy. He knew it wouldn't. This world seems to be the complete opposite of the unity that Jesus prayed for. This world is sparked by a sense of scarcity instead of abundance, fear instead of courage, and selfishness instead of sacrificial love. So, Jesus didn't pray that it would be easy. He prayed, rather, that God would comfort the disciples, support us and be with us, amidst our challenges. And that through the unity and protection of God, the prayers of Jesus, and our resurrected lives in the here and now, we might all become followers who are out of this world.

Amen.