

"Exclusive, but not Excluded"

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May 28, 2006

Easter 7(b)

John 17: 11b-19

To borrow the words of the great inventor Thomas Edison, sermon preparation is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. I can only speak for myself, but even after twenty-five years of preaching it never seems to get any easier. In fact, I often find myself frustrated over not having anything profound to say. But then I must remind myself for the thousandth time that the profound must be experienced before it can be expressed. Words give, at best, poetic shape to the Mystery that has shaped us and shapes us still. In this sense, our most hallowed words linger as benedictions. Our words, combined with deeds of healing and peace, are echoes of the Word of creation that knows no beginning or end.

Today's gospel follows this logic completely. John's gospel, more than the other three, describes God as Logos, as <sup>3</sup>the word<sup>2</sup> that brought light into a world of utter darkness. Just as the sun was created to separate night from day, John's gospel tells us that Jesus came as a light shining in the darkness--and that the deep, murky, murdering darkness of this world will never extinguish it.

What makes these words profound comes not by scrutinizing John's esoteric theology. Rather, it's our common experience of being shaped and skewed by endless struggles of light and darkness in our own lives. This struggle is what makes our sojourn in this world so sacred. When Jesus prays for his disciples in today's gospel, which includes us as well, he asks God to protect us, guide us and sanctify us in such a way that we live in stark contrast to the world around us: We are to be in the world, just not of the world; people who live an exclusive life, but not people excluded from life.

The great American poet Carl Sandburg was once asked what was the most offensive word in the English language. After a long pause Sandburg said, "the word exclusive."

I can only imagine, but I'd have to think that Carl Sandburg would find John's gospel offensive for this very reason. And many of us most of the time would side with Sandburg and take exception with any theology that makes religion exclusive. Next Sunday we celebrate the Day of Pentecost, the church's birthday, if you will, a birthday that had guests from every conceivable race, ethnicity and religion. Pentecost is, no doubt, the church's spiritual beginning characterized by a generous and wide-open embrace of others. And yet, after the Day of Pentecost, much of the book of

Acts deals with the controversy between Peter and Paul over the inclusion of gentiles into the life of the church. After all, the ancient church was a Jewish sect that still had an exclusive identity. Eventually, Paul won out over Peter, but this same struggle between exclusivity and inclusivity remains to this day. Mind you, the kinds of people and concerns that surround this struggle are different, but the core issue remains: Are people of faith called to be exclusive and set apart, or inclusive and willing to assimilate?

As much as I would like to tell you otherwise, John's gospel defines the Christian life as exclusive. When Jesus prays to God what tradition calls his "high priestly prayer," he says, "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world....I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." In the world, but not of the world; an exclusive people, but not a people excluded from life.

This emphasis on being in but not of the world is a distinction with a real difference. Just as John's gospel gives us a version of Christian identity that is not completely collaborated by the other gospels, so are there many versions of Christianity in today's world that can hardly be supported by the gospels in the canon.

Although John argues for a way of life that is exclusive, his gospel makes clear that Jesus was flesh and blood, subject to death, and destined to suffer injustice and unfairness like any other human being. That's John's version of Christian existence--one that rubs against the inclusivist grain of my theology, but still a theology that I can affirm and live with.

But there are other versions of Christianity in America that go a step or two further than John. These include the gospel of success, the gospel of happiness and the gospel of positive thinking. These gospels mostly have their origins in the human potential movement. They cleverly psychologize the faith as a means to achieving higher ends--rather than a discipline that is to be lived as an end unto itself. The false gospel of prosperity not only encourages Christians to be exclusive, but to fully expect that we will be excluded from the normal woes of life-- like poverty, sickness, incorrigible teenagers, unfulfilling jobs and bad marriages. The false gospel of success preached in most American mega-churches today boils down the struggle between light and dark to this: when life hands you a lemon, let faith transform it into lemonade. One can only wonder why these mega-church preachers don't set up shop in places like Botswana. Could it be that it takes more than a barge full of sugar to make the bitterness of AIDS and famine go away? We may not be of the world, but as Christians we are definitely in it. We may be set apart, but never to be set aside by happy gospels of indifference.

I once knew a good Christian woman who died from ovarian cancer.

Toward the end of her long and courageous battle I spoke to her about her faith, asking her if or how she had reconciled her beliefs with her situation. She had a lot to say, but one thing was crisp and clear. She said, "in the early days I used to consider the fact that I'm a Christian and then ask 'why?', but after reading the Bible and praying some more the question became 'why not?'" This woman, I tell you, was an example of what I'm trying to say: she was exclusively Christian, but not excluded or exempt from the life of the world. The gospel of human potential looks at tragedy and blithely asks "why?" The gospel for today accepts tragedy with a "why not?"

Ultimately, the gospel for today singles out the church for its distinctiveness in the world. In large part the church is a community, like many other communities in society, distinguished by neither its virtues nor its moral perfection. Its exclusivity is the gift of God--who assigns it a special role to play and who calls it as a community of strangers, which, like its Lord, does not belong to the world. Amen.