**Easter and Beyond**

**Sunday April 15, 2018**

**“Sent into the World” (John 17:6-19)**

**1. Introduction: *Famous Last Words***

If you knew your time was near, what famous last words would you speak to those around you? On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. There had been threats to his life in the past and when he travelled to Memphis his flight was delayed because of a bomb threat. On the night before his was killed he addressed a gathering and spoke these words:

“We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord” (<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/martin-luther-kings-last-sermon-ive-seen-the-promised-land/128049.htm>).

Rev. King gave his audience words of encouragement amidst the dangerous times that they were in. He sensed that his life was fragile and that he might not see his dream of racial equality and harmony realized. But like Moses, he’d been to the mountaintop, gazed over at the promised land and encouraged others to strive on.

Jesus too had famous last words for his close friends. He knew that his hour had come, so as they shared their final meal together and he gave his disciples words to encourage them through the challenges ahead. He also prayed to his Father that he would keep, protect and consecrate his disciple who would remain in the world to continue his mission. His prayer, however, was not just for those gathered around the table with him in the upper room. His prayer is for all who believe in him.

**2. We Belong to Jesus**

This morning’s Gospel lesson takes us back to a time before Good Friday and Easter to the night that Jesus was arrested. His final hours of freedom were spent with his close friends, his disciples, and he demonstrated his deep love for them by washing their feet (13:1-17). He also showed his care for them by giving them some valuable parting words that would prepare them for the many challenges ahead (John 13:18-16:33). His words of warning and comfort anticipated his departure from this world and his return to the Father. With his disciples left behind to carry on, Jesus challenged them to remain faithful in the face of hostile opposition. Yet their anxieties about the road ahead were met with Jesus’ promises of abundant resources. His promised provisions included a life-giving relationship with God, the gift of prayer, enduring peace, abundant joy and the presence of the Spirit. After Jesus finished these parting words to his disciples, he turned his attention to his heavenly Father and entered a time of prayer.

Jesus’ prayer in John 17 is the longest prayer in the New Testament and it crowns his final discourse. The prayer begins with Jesus’ request for the Father to glorify the Son in this important hour so that the Son can give glory back to the Father (17:1). Jesus’ prayer then turns from its focus on his relationship to the Father to his concern for his disciples (17:6-26). Knowing that his hour has come, Jesus prays for their protection and consecration as they are sent into the world to carry out God’s mission. This part of the prayer explains *why* Jesus is praying so intently for his disciples (17:6-10). Put simply, it is because *they belong to Jesus*. Christ has a profound relationship with his followers and their identity in him greatly impacts their lives in the world. For this reason, Jesus lifts his prayer to the Father on their behalf.

Jesus prays to his Father, “*My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me, because they belong to you*” (17:9). Certainly, Jesus cares for the world; he gave his life to save the world (John 3:16-17). But in that darkest hour, he prayed for his disciples because he knew that the road ahead would not be easy. He describes his disciples as those whom the Father gave him, those who belong to the Father. This relationship is one that entails *belonging* and *entrusting*. The heavenly Father draws people to himself and they *belong* to him (17:6, 9). He then *entrusts* these ones to the love and care of Jesus, his Son (17:6, 9, 10). The bond between God and his people is forged through revelation and response. In his prayer, Jesus declares, “I have *revealed* *your name* to the people that you gave me from the world” (17:6). In Jewish thought a person’s name disclosed his or her character so Jesus made God’s name known by revealing God’s personality and power. Through his words and actions, Jesus revealed the nature of God to humanity. In the larger story of John’s Gospel, it’s clear that not everyone responded positively to Jesus’ revelation of the Father (John 1:11). But the ones who belong to Jesus responded positively to his divine message. These people accepted his words, which came from the Father, and as a result they believed that Jesus was sent from God (17:7-8). Not only did they entrust their lives to Jesus, but they walked in obedience to God’s word; they have *kept* the Father’s word. Through their response of faith to Jesus they have brought *glory* to him – those who believe in Jesus are his *glory* (17:10).

The power of Jesus’ words should never be lost on us; it should resonate with our very being. When Jesus speaks of the ones the Father has given to him, he wasn’t speaking of just the circle of disciples gathered in that upper room; he was talking about all whom the Father has drawn to himself and given to Jesus. That includes all who have responded to Jesus’ message and have entrusted their lives to him. So, you and I *belong* to Jesus! This is the crucial starting point of Jesus’ prayer – a reminder that all Christians have been drawn into a loving relationship with God that is best described as *belonging* to God. As Jesus’ prayer continues, he asks the Father to protect and to consecrate his disciples as they continue in the world. But the foundation of his prayer is we, his disciples, *belong* to God.

Brennan Manning (1934-2013) knew that he belonged to God and that God deeply loved him. He was an author, theologian, and former priest who is best known for his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel.* He was also an alcoholic, something that he struggled with his entire life. But he also had a profound sense of the love and the grace of God. He wrote in his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, “My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it.” Through his writing and public speaking, he communicated the message of God’s grace to many, all the while struggling with alcoholism and depression. Yet, he still had an overpowering knowledge of God’s love for him. In another book, he wrote, “Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion” (*Abba’s Child*). He also taught people to pray this very simple prayer to focus their lives on God and his love.

*Abba, I belong to you*

This prayer is for everyone who needs to know that their heavenly Father loves them no matter what. I’m stressed about life. *Abba, I belong to you.* I’m haunted by the mistakes of the past and the sins of the present. *Abba, I belong to you.* I’m worried about my kids. *Abba, I belong to you.* I feel that I’m not worthy of your grace. *Abba, I belong to you.* I’m an addict. *Abba, I belong to you.* I’m ashamed of who I am. *Abba, I belong to you.*

Manning wrote in his autobiography, *All is Grace, “*My message, unchanged for more than fifty years, is this: God loves you unconditionally, as you are and not as you should be, because nobody is as they should be.”

(If you’re interested you can read Philip Yancey’s beautiful and honest tribute to Manning on his webpage, <https://philipyancey.com/farewell-brennan>).

**3. We are Protected by God**

Deeply burdened for his beloved, Jesus continues in prayer for them. Knowing that his time on earth with them was ending, he asks his “*Holy* Father” to protect and guard them (17:11). Jesus was departing from the world and returning to his Father, but his disciples remained in the world. For this reason alone, Jesus prays for their safety because he knows that in this world, they will have trouble (John 16:33). Their belief in Jesus and their acceptance of God’s Word puts them at odds with the God-rejecting world because they don’t belong in this world anymore (17:14). Yet the danger that they face was not only from the outside world.

Jesus prays, “Holy Father, *protect them in your name* that you have given me, so that they may be *one*, as we are one” (17:11). Jesus is asking his Father to empower these beloved disciples to walk on the path of life that conforms to his divine character. He is praying that the Father would keep them so close to himself that their lives would reflect his nature. The direct result of this is seen in the harmonious fellowship of the faithful. “Holy Father, protect them, *so that they may be one, as we are one*” (17:11). One of the dangers that Jesus anticipated was division within the Christian community, so he asks the Father to keep his followers together. He was praying that the *oneness* between the Father and himself would be manifested and maintained among Christians.

In response to Jesus’ prayer for unity, some of us might wonder, “Where is the unity among Christians?” Admittedly our experience of Christian community has not always been one of harmony. Misunderstandings, arguments, power struggles, hurt feelings, strained relationships can sometimes characterize church life. While we care deeply for one another, we can also hurt each other with our words and actions. How we work through these challenges is crucially important to the health of our congregation. When misunderstandings, conflicts or hurt arises, do we avoid the situation or do we talk about and seek to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters?

Every communion Sunday we pass the peace of Christ as an expression of our oneness in Christ. But it’s so challenging to keep the peace of Christ among us on a regular basis. By his Spirit, God has fashioned this group of believers into a unified body, but we are called to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Maintaining the unity of the Spirit starts with each one of us as we choose to imitate Christ and practice true humility. This means that we need to cast aside our sometimes-inflated sense of self or our personal agendas or our individual rights and consider those around us. The humility of Jesus needs to impact our words, actions and attitudes.

While internal battles threaten to pull us apart, attacks from the outside can also thwart the mission of the church in the world. Jesus prays that the Father would hold his disciples in his loving hands and out of the clutches of the evil one (17:15). Yet, God’s protection of his beloved ones is not an escape from the world and its trials. Jesus is not asking the Father to remove us from the world, rather, he asking him to keep us safe from the evil one, who is actively opposed God’s work in the world. Being a Christian is not an escape from the world and its harsh realities. We are not insulated from the world, rather we are sent out into the world, yet we do not belong to the world (17:16). No, we belong to Jesus and are protected by the Father.

**4. We are Consecrated by God’s Word**

Yes, Jesus declares that his disciples “do not belong to this world any more than I do” (17:15, 16). So, Jesus’ followers exist in this paradoxical situation where they live in this world, yet they do not belong to this world. For this reason, Jesus asks the Father to make them holy or consecrate them or sanctify them *with the truth of his Word* (17:17). The same Word that the disciples obeyed (17:6) and received (17:8), which nurtured their belief in Jesus (17:8) is the same Word that sets them apart for God’s mission. *Consecrated by God’s Word*, we are sent out into the world with a mission, in the same way that Jesus was sent into the world with a mission (17:18). Yet, God’s work of making us holy by his Word entails that we are encountering his Word on a regular basis. And this life-giving, sanctifying experience with God’s Word is more than just casually reading a verse here and there. As I was researching on Brennan Manning for my earlier point, I discovered his insightful reflections on reading God’s Word.

“The Word we study has to be the Word we pray. My personal experience of the relentless tenderness of God came not from exegetes, theologians, and spiritual writers, but from sitting still in the presence of the living Word and beseeching Him to help me understand with my head and heart His written Word. Sheer scholarship alone cannot reveal to us the gospel of grace. We must never allow the authority of books, institutions, or leaders to replace the authority of knowing Jesus Christ personally and directly. When the religious views of others interpose between us and the primary experience of Jesus as the Christ, we become unconvicted and unpersuasive travel agents handing out brochures to places we have never visited” (*The Ragamuffin Gospel*).

There is a lot in Manning’s quote to digest, but I especially appreciate these words, “My personal experience of the relentless tenderness of God came not from exegetes, theologians, and spiritual writers, but from sitting still in the presence of the living Word and beseeching Him to help me understand with my head and heart His written Word.” Every Monday morning I start to work on the Sunday sermon. One of my favourite parts of the week is opening up my Greek New Testament and translating the words of the passage. After writing out my initial reflections on the passage, I dive into the biblical commentaries and glean insights from others. The most difficult part of the process is taking all those notes and fashioning the Sunday sermon from them. I enjoy studying and preaching very much. But I know that the sermon is no replacement for each one of us encountering God in his Word in a real and personal way. When we sit in the presence of Jesus, the living Word, and ask him to help us to understand with our heads and hearts his written Word, God speaks to us and sanctifies us with his Word. My task as pastor and preacher is not to replace this vital spiritual encounter with God; instead, it’s my job to encourage you to take steps toward that meaningful encounter with his Word. So, I pray as Jesus did, “Holy Father, consecrate them in truth, your Word is truth” (17:18).

Belonging to Jesus, Protected by God, Consecrated by God’s Word, we are sent into the world for mission.