

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, May 24, 2009  
Rev. John Tapscott

**"IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD"**

John 17:6-19

A woman was teaching her three-year old daughter Caitlin the Lord's Prayer. For a few weeks at bedtime Caitlin repeated the lines after her mother. Then one evening she decided to go solo. The mother listened with pride as Caitlin correctly said the words up to the end of the prayer. But then she said, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from e-mail." That's the world we live in, isn't it? Did you hear, and this is no joke, that in January Pope Benedict endorsed an i-Tunes prayer book, and launched a Vatican YouTube channel, to help spread the Christian message to young people.

I read about a young child who was acting up during the morning worship hour. The parents did their best to maintain some order in the pew but were losing the battle. Finally, the father picked the little fellow up and walked sternly down the aisle on his way out. Just before reaching the safety of the foyer, the little boy called loudly to the congregation, "Pray for me! Pray for me!"

In today's reading from John's Gospel, chapter 17, we read what some people call the "other Lord's Prayer." It was the night of Jesus' betrayal. Twelve hours later he would be crucified. Jesus and his disciples gathered together in the Upper Room. It was a solemn time. But Jesus was not only thinking of himself and what was ahead; he was thinking of his disciples. He prayed for them. I'm sure that the disciples must have been strengthened and encouraged by Jesus' memorable prayer, not only then, but in the days ahead. In fact, we can say that the Father answered Jesus' prayer on behalf of the disciples.

Now there's a phrase which Jesus used twice in his prayer. It wasn't something he needed to tell the Father. He said it in order to get the truth deep into the disciples' hearts and minds. In verse 16, Jesus said, "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world," and again in verse 18, "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world." But Jesus said that they would still be in the world, at least for a while. Verse 17 - "And now I am no longer in the world, and I am coming to you Holy Father, but they are in the world." and verse 15, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world." The disciples were in the world, but they did not belong to the world. The same can be said for all Christians, all of us who claim Jesus Christ as Saviour and

follow him. We are in the world, but we do not belong to the world.

Now the world in John's Gospel means "human society as it organizes itself apart from God, either ignoring or working against God's purposes." It corresponds to the secular world of today in which God is cut down to size or shoved aside altogether, a world in which humankind is exalted as the source of all wisdom and knowledge. We live in this world, but we don't belong to it. We belong to a higher realm, an eternal order. We belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible describes this in various ways. Paul tells us that our citizenship is in heaven. Hebrews says that we are on the earth as strangers and pilgrims, seeking "a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." We are in the world, but we do not belong to the world. Someone put it like this, "We are in the world, but we are not of the world." Being in the world but not belonging to it gives us four things, all beginning with the letter "p."

**First, it gives us a sense of purpose.**

In verse 18, Jesus prayed to God, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." The disciples were a sent people, with a purpose. And what was their purpose? Jesus told the disciples after his resurrection, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." And that's who we are too, those of us who are in the world, but who belong to another world. We are sent into this world with a purpose. Your purpose and mine is to be a witness to God and to Jesus and to the world beyond this world. Here in this world we are witnesses to eternal values like love and truth and righteousness. We have been sanctified, set apart for this purpose.

Look, your place in life is no accident. God has placed you in your particular home, community, workplace or school to be his witness. That doesn't necessarily mean talking to everyone about God and Jesus and your faith, though we shouldn't hesitate to do that when the time and place is right. You may be the only Christ-follower among a group of two dozen or more people. And God has sent you there to be a witness to the reality of God and the love and grace of Jesus Christ. If you know that, you may be surprised at the opportunities you will have to say a good word for the church, for the faith, for Christ, for righteousness' sake.

One of our members, God bless him, took a stand one Christmas. He called the tree in his office, well, a Christmas tree. He was told by his boss that he must refer to it as a "holiday tree." But he refused, saying, "To me that is a Christmas tree, and no matter what anyone else calls it, that's what I'm going

to call it." Oh, there might be other ways you can be a witnesses - by quietly sharing Christian faith and hope with someone in distress, by standing with a person whom others are ridiculing. You are being a witness by the fact that you get up and come here on Sunday morning. Not a whole lot of people do that these days, you know. But as those who are in the world but not of the world, that's our purpose. We are sent by Jesus to be his witnesses in this world.

**Secondly, being in the world but not belonging to it gives us special protection.** In verse 17 Jesus prayed to the Father for the disciples, "I am not asking that you take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one."

Now Jesus wasn't praying that the Father would protect the disciples from all harm. Bad things did happen to the disciples - persecution and hardship and for most of them, death for their faith. But Jesus was asking the Father to protect the disciples against the evil one and keep them in God's Name. And the Father answered that prayer, because only Judas was lost to the evil one.

You see, what the evil one wants to do is to separate God's people from God. The evil one tries to make us, "not only in the world, but of the world, too." Now he tries to do that in obvious ways, but in subtle ways, too. Did you see the newspaper article about the possible revision to the Girl Guides promise. The current promise says, "I promise to do my best, to be true to myself, my God and Canada. I will help others and accept the guiding law." That would be changed to "I promise to be true to myself, my community and Canada. I will help others and accept the Guiding Law." Now that's not just a subtle change. When you get rid of God, it's a sea change. Thankfully there is strong resistance among Girl Guiding parents against the proposal. Hopefully, it will not be adopted. If it is, there will be no more Girl Guides cookies in our house, I'm afraid. But that's the kind of thing that the evil one tries to do - to separate us from God, to make us totally "of the world."

Thankfully Jesus prayed for us and continues to pray that the Father will protect us against the evil one's schemes. And we have our part to play, too. We really have to be on guard. Being in the world, but not belonging to it, doesn't give us protecting from all bad things, though God can and does protect us from some of them. But God does give us special protection against evil schemes which would separate us from God. God keeps us as those who are in the world, but not of this world.

**Thirdly, being in this world but not belonging to it gives us power.** Just before ascending into heaven, Jesus said to the disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you..." (Acts 1:8).

If you live as one who belongs only to this world, then you must live on your own strength and power. But as citizens of the heavenly realm we can work and serve and live with power that comes from above. This is one of the blessings of being in the world but not belonging to it. We have access to a source of power beyond ourselves, power that comes from the unseen, eternal realm.

I read a story a few years ago about the long and heavy freight trains which haul grain from the prairie provinces up and over the Rockies and down to the West Coast ports. Sometimes the big diesel engines are inadequate to pull all that weight up the steep mountain passes. They stall in a cloud of black diesel smoke and the whole train grinds to a halt. But then two more engines come from the other side and hook on to the stalled train. With the added power the train starts up and now makes it to the top of the slope.

So it is for us who are in the world but not of the world. When our own resources prove inadequate, power is made available to us from the invisible realm to which we belong, power we access by prayer and faith. The power of God's Holy Spirit comes and makes us triumphantly adequate to our calling and our challenges. As we look above, power comes to guide, to strengthen and to pull us through. "I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

**Finally, being in the world but not belonging to it gives us a promise.**

Look, I am an unashamed believer in heaven. Of course, I happen to believe in the other place too. I am so glad God loved this sinner enough to send His only Son to live and die and rise again to save me from it and bring me into God's family of redeemed people. He did that for you, too. By faith in Christ you and I no longer belong to this world. We already belong to the Father's realm; we're just not there yet. But one day we will be.

Belonging to this world alone gives us no real hope. This world cannot fulfill our immortal longings. It will finally give us nothing but death and despair. But what a hope, what a promise comes from belonging to another world, a world where Jesus is preparing a place for us. The Bible doesn't give us details about heaven. But it assures us of heaven's reality. The Bible tells us "that eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

Friends, we are in the world, but we do not belong to it. That gives us purpose, protection, power, and promise. And for all that we lift our songs of praise to Almighty God.



