

May 16, 2021
John 17:6-19

Easter 7
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Set Apart to Love”

“Sanctify them in the truth; your name is truth.”

One person’s trash is another person’s treasure.

I learned the meaning of that phrase on my hometown’s annual clean up day. It was the day when residents could put out any unwanted item on the curb that was no longer useful to them, to be carted away by the town. A very motley assortment of unwanted items could be found throughout the community: old appliances, well-worn furniture, broken tables and chairs, threadbare rugs, and some items that were of mysterious origin. But what the original owner considered trash was often viewed very differently by others; cars and trucks would cruise the streets and stop to pick up many of those discarded items before the town trucks took them away. I often marveled at some of the things that people would claim; to my eyes, they didn’t seem to have any purpose. But in the eyes of others, they were treasures that I’m sure were put to a new and good use by those who say a treasure where others saw only trash. We may often wonder why some people see things very differently from us. What is a treasured family heirloom to some is an old and worn-out piece of junk to others. An artwork that looks like the work of a four-year-old may be considered a masterpiece that is worthy of hanging in an art museum. An athlete that is chosen in the draft may not look like a worthy candidate to help a team but is seen by others as the key ingredient to lead that team to a championship. What one person sees as useless another person sees as useful and precious.

As we read through the Gospels, we may wonder what Jesus saw in the people he called to be disciples. They were not what you might consider to be the “best and the brightest.” They were not people in positions of power and prominence; they were not members of the upper class, people in positions of influence over others. Some of his disciples were humble fishermen; others like Nathaniel had to be convinced to “come and see” Jesus before they accepted his invitation; he even called the despised tax collector Matthew to discipleship. Throughout his ministry, these disciples were often vain, argumentative, and persons who repeatedly failed to understand Jesus’ teachings or what it meant in their lives as his followers. At his hour of greatest need, none of these disciples stood by Jesus: Judas Iscariot betrayed him, and Peter denied knowing him three times. All of them abandoned Jesus on the day of his crucifixion

and were cowering in fear when they received word from Mary Magdalene that *“I have seen the Lord.”* (John 20:18). To our eyes, they appear to be as unqualified and useless as some of the junk that lined the streets of my hometown.

But Jesus sees them quite differently; from the beginning he calls these people to *“follow me, and I will make you fish for people”* (Matthew 4:19). He responds to Nathaniel’s skepticism (*“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* – John 1:46) by greeting him as *“truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”* to which Nathaniel responds confess that Jesus is *“the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!”* (1:47-49). Jesus answers Thomas’ doubts by inviting him to see and touch the wounds of his crucifixion so that Thomas can confess Jesus as *“My Lord and my God!”* (John 20:28). The risen Lord meets the defeated Peter and restores calls him anew to *“feed my sheep.”* (21:17). While others might have discarded these disciples as unreliable and unworthy of their calling, Jesus continues to see them as the ones he called to *“be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). They were the embodiment of Peter’s invitation to *“come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* (1 Peter 2:4-5). Our Lord who called these unlikely persons to be his disciples at the beginning of his ministry now prays for them as his ministry is about to draw to a close. After sharing his last supper with them and giving them the commandment to *“love one another as I have loved you”* (15:12), John concludes his narration of Jesus’ farewell to his disciples with a prayer in which Jesus looks up to heaven and says *“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you”* (17:1). This farewell narrative is similar to those found in the Old Testament, including Moses’ farewell speech and blessing of the Israelites:

- *“So Israel lives in safety; untroubled is Jacob’s abode in a land of grain and wine, where the heavens drop down dew. Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph! Your enemies shall come fawning to you, and you shall tread on their backs.”* – Deuteronomy 33:28-29.

Farewell prayers were well documented in the religious literature of the ancient Mediterranean world and would have been a familiar genre to the first readers of the Gospel. But Jesus’ prayer in John is not the conventional prayer of a dying man; it is *“the prayer of the One on the verge of willingly laying down his life and thus completing God’s work.”* (Gail O’Day). The prayer is crafted and positioned as the

theological climax of the Fourth Gospel, standing between Jesus' words to his disciples in the Farewell Discourse and the beginning of the story of his passion and death. The prayer stands at the pivotal turn into the events of Jesus' "hour" and needs to be read in the context of his announcement that *"I have said this to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"* (16:33).

The portion of Jesus' prayer that is today's Gospel lesson begins with Jesus' continuing to describe the work through which he has glorified God on earth: *"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They are yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."* (17:6). The phrase "I have made your name know" refers to revealing the character and identity of God, reminiscent of the psalmist's cry that *"I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you"* (Psalm 22:22). Jesus has revealed knowledge of the relationship of God and Jesus to the community of disciples who will continue to live in the "world" (*kosmos*), which in John stands for the sphere of those who are at enmity with God:

- "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own did not accept him." – 1:10-11.
- "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testified against it that its works are evil." – 7:7.
- "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out." – 12:31.

This helps explain why in Jesus' prayer *"I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours"* (17:9). Jesus' prayer to God for the world as *kosmos* is precluded by definition; his prayers can only be for the work of the community in the world, not for the world that seeks to destroy the work of Jesus and his disciples. The beginning of the faith community's life is once again located with the gift of God (*"What the Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand"* – 10:29). For Jesus to be glorified in the community (17:10) means that the identity of Jesus is made visible in them. As Jesus made clear in his commandment to his disciples, the identity of Jesus is made visible in the community when they love one another as he has loved them:

- “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” – 13:34-35.
- “The formation of a community based in the mutuality and intimacy of the relationship of God and Jesus belongs to the completion of God’s word.” – O’Day.

As Jesus knows that his time in the world is drawing to a close, he prays for God to “*protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one*” (17:11). Jesus prays that God keep secure the community’s grounding in God’s name to ensure the unity of the faith community, which mirrors the unity of God and Jesus (“*The Father and I are one.*” – 10:30). As Jesus was responsible for the safeguarding of the community during his ministry, so his departure necessitates that this work now be entrusted to God: “*But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves*” (17:13). This joy will give the disciples strength and hope as they face the animosity of the world that stands in opposition to God and God’s Word: “*I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world*” (17:14). The community’s relationship with the world is sharply dualistic; neither Jesus nor the disciples belong to the world, and as such they incur the world’s hatred. Jesus’ prayer is not that God will take them out of the world, for this is the same world that God so loved that God gave his only Son (3:16), the world into which the disciples will be sent to proclaim the good news of God’s love for all. Jesus’ prayer that God will “*protect them from the evil one*” (17:15), known elsewhere as “the ruler of this world,” the personification of the cosmic forces in the world that are opposed to God (“*I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father*” (14:30-31). It is for the preservation of this unity in the face of the cosmic power of evil that Jesus seeks God’s help; “*the community needs this protection because it is to live out its identity and vocation in the world*” (O’Day).

The community of disciples that Jesus has called and will send out into the world is a community that he prays God will “*sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.*” (17:17). “Sanctify” (*haguazo*) means “to set apart for sacred work or duty.” Jesus is asking God to do for the disciples what God has already done for him: set them apart for God’s work in the world. To be sanctified “in the truth” refers to the truth of God revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus (“*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.*” – 14:6). It will be through

the disciples' share in Jesus' distinctive revelation of God that they are set apart for their work in the world. It is through their sanctification and sending that the disciples continue Jesus' work in the world: "*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*" (17:18). The faith community will continue Jesus' revelation of God in the world, and it is through Jesus' own sanctification that the disciples will be sanctified in the truth, set apart to continue Jesus' work of sharing God's light and love with all the world.

- "Jesus' entire mission, his completion of the work of God in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, enables the sanctification of the faith community, because it is in Jesus' entire mission that the full truth of God is revealed to them." – O'Day.

The faith community that was sanctified by Christ and sent forth to share his Word was not always looked upon favourably; in fact, many people looked upon the early Christian more like trash than treasure. When on the day of Pentecost the disciples were empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim God's Word in the languages of all who gathered in Jerusalem for this festival, the people who heard them speaking in their native tongues were amazed and astonished, asking "*are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?*" (Acts 2:7-8). The first letter of Peter is written to a community who had been ostracized and looked down upon because of their faith, so the Apostle reminds them of who they are because they have been chosen and sanctified by the one who is "chosen and precious":

- "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." – 1 Peter 2:9-10.

Paul reminds the readers of his first letter to the Corinthians that they were often seen by others as people of little value, as more trash than treasure, but that they are precisely the ones who have been set apart to be the community of disciples who will bear the precious gift of God's gracious love:

- "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to share the wise; God chose what is

weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” – 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

In Holy Baptism, God claims us as God’s beloved children and makes us members of the church which is the Body of Christ; *“this church alone is called the body of Christ, which Christ renews, sanctifies, and governs by his Spirit.”* (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession*). The church is the community of people who have been born anew to a living hope through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; *“once people are justified, the Holy Spirit also renews and sanctifies them. From this renewal and sanctification the fruits of good works follow.”* (*Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*). The church which is the Body of Christ in every generation is a community which may not look very impressive to some; in fact, in our present age many people wonder if the church has a future or is still relevant in what many call a post-Christian era. But we must remember that while we may have chosen which congregation to which we will belong, none of us chose to be a member of the Church; that was God’s decision when God claimed us in the waters of Baptism. The one who calls us does not see us as others may, but always looks upon us as God’s beloved children, sons and daughters for whom our Saviour died, a treasured community to whom our Lord has entrusted the treasure of the good news of Jesus Christ our Lord.

- “The Christian gospel isn’t about the perfect church, it’s about the perfect love of God, which none of us deserves, and from which we all fall short. The church is not a little bit of the world that has finally been fixed up, righted. In a real way, the only thing that distinguishes church and world is that the church knows something about the world that it doesn’t usually know about itself: that it is greatly loved.” – Douglas John Hall.

Yes, one person’s trash is another person’s treasure. What one person sees as worthless junk is seen as a precious heirloom by another person. When our Lord looks upon the people God has called into the church, he doesn’t see our faults and failings, our sins and shortcomings; God looks at us through the gracious eyes that so loved the world – with all of its faults and rebelliousness – that God sent his only Son so that everyone might know of the gracious love of God that sees us as chosen and precious, sanctified in the truth that we share as God’s beloved people, the Church that embodies the love of God in our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.