

“Not of This World”
Acts 1: 15 – 17, 21 – 26 John 17: 6 – 19
Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.
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Søren Kierkegaard was a Danish theologian who probably did more than anyone to help Christians find the most solid foundation for faith. He once gave this warning. (paraphrase) If someone tells you that becoming a Christian will make your life better, then run the other way as fast as you can, because, if anything, it will make your life more challenging. While he was a Christian himself who encouraged other people to be faithful Christians, he just wanted them to have realistic and grounded expectations. He taught that, ultimately, faith could not be based in reason. He clarified his position in this way: (Again, I paraphrase) It is impossible to have a comfortable faith because you are a finite human being in relationship with an infinite God. At some point, the faithful Christian must decide to reach out in faith for understanding and transformation that cannot come by means of reason alone. Let me clarify that I have nothing against reason, nor do I think that Kierkegaard did either. In fact, reason surely provides vital nourishment for the process of spiritual growth. But, like anything else real, we must understand its limitations. Reason can take us very far in our understanding, but there are some places it just cannot go.

Kierkegaard’s struggle to define faith strikes at the heart of today’s Gospel passage in which Jesus thanks God for the those who have been “given to him”, and he identifies them as being “not of this world.” He notes that the world hates them and that while he is not asking that they be taken out of this world, he prays that they will be kept from the “evil one.”

Wow, that’s pretty heavy stuff. But let’s see if we can sort it out. Two questions arise that might turn out to be versions of the same question: How are we to understand Jesus’ reference to “the world”, and what does it mean to be lost to the “evil one”.

So that we can keep this sermon from degenerating into mere philosophical speculation, I want to ground these questions in a more immediate concern. Consider this: In the past, this church (along with most other churches) has never had to define itself very clearly. And for many main-line church people, the very idea of evangelism has been either ignored into non-existence or seen to be so frightening that it has been actively avoided.

In all fairness, a generation or two ago there was no pressing need for careful definition, but in today’s cultural atmosphere churches like this one are faced with a big problem. If you don’t take the responsibility to define who you are as a church, and if you don’t make the effort to get the word out, it is very possible that in another generation churches like these will cease to exist.

I am going to make the assumption that you want to try defining yourselves. But if you are to accomplish the task, I think you are going to need a few tools. Before you can hope to “spread the Gospel Word”, you will need to know what that Word is. And you will need to know how the gospel message of the church fits or doesn’t fit with what “the world” offers. You will need to understand that the church can never compete head-to-head in the entertainment marketplace

given all the other opportunities that are clamoring for people's attention and money, so some other approach must be found.

In other words, if the church plays by "the World's rules", it will likely lose. So, it seems to me that if you are going to go to the trouble of continuing as a church, you might as well know why you are doing it. And you must base your community on the actual, but very controversial rules that Jesus offers.

Getting back to our gospel reading, let's talk for a moment about what Jesus means by "the world". Is the world really as bad as this passage seems to indicate? Well, there's not really anything fundamentally bad about it, particularly if we understand it as being all of creation. Jesus uses the term differently, however. And according to his definition, there is one significant exception to the goodness of the world: "The World" tends to be superficial. For Jesus, the world is that aspect of existence that we can apprehend with our senses. Furthermore, in order to survive in "The World", one must compete and win according to a particular set of rules.

I think we can better understand his meaning by referring back to Jesus' temptations. You have heard me say before that when Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted, he was tempted by the enticements of the world. That is to say that the essential temptations in the wilderness were identical to the very values that "The world" promotes, namely: Comfort, Safety, Power, and Status. As inviting and reasonable as these qualities seem to be, they all require us to live in a competitive world, where someone else must lose in order for us to win. I might add that the word for "world" in New Testament Greek is "kosmos". Our first association with the word certainly is a positive one. Isn't the cosmos the whole wonderful universe, after all? Yes, it is, and for that, it is to be loved. However, the word also carries the meaning of "adornment", which is why we also derive our word "cosmetic" from the same root. What is cosmetic is the form or the order of something. A cosmetic change can take place only on the surface. So, it is incapable of dealing with deeper layers of meaning.

I propose to you that Jesus' purpose was not to change the world's cosmetic nature. Jesus came to transform the world at its depths. He did not come to elevate the disciples and other believers above the unbelievers. He came to present humans with the opportunity to rely on a very different set of values and to make them the central feature of human existence.

Jesus demonstrates his belief by challenging anyone who places their own importance over the importance of others: in other words, anyone who relies on competition and judgment to win over others. He replaces the worldly values of competition and winning with the values of the Realm of God, namely cooperation and love. In that spirit, when he prays, he expresses his gratitude that he can hold on to what really matters: his relationship with his disciples.

Also, when he prays, he does not ask that the disciples be taken out of the world. This is where we human beings live, after all, but he asks that they be protected from the "evil one". To me, this phrase sounds like an echo of the line in the Lord's Prayer where we pray that God not "lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil, instead." According to the translation from the Aramaic language, Jesus is praying that we will be prevented from settling for the superficial in

life, or, to put it in other words, that we not be led to believe that life's meaning is to be found in its "cosmetic" layer.

Jesus goes to such great lengths to distinguish the values of the Realm of God from the values of the world. Perhaps it is essential to the Christian faith that we understand that difference, too.

So, what are these differences? Let's look to Jesus' teaching to answer the question. What subject does he talk about the most? Love, of course: he establishes the law of love as the foundation for all others. The importance of avoiding judgment is the second, and being faithful to one's integrity also seems to come to the top of the pile.

While his words are instructive, so is his behavior. What then can we learn by observing the way he lives? That we are to live with integrity, that we are to reach out across the artificial lines that separate people, and that we will come to know that there is something more important to life than what is found in its cosmetic layer.

There are some practical implications to this sermon. It seems to me that using the "stick" of hell or the "carrot" of the good life to motivate people's religious activity leaves us at the superficial level, something like: obedience is good and disobedience is bad. Obey and you will thrive, but if you disobey, you will be destroyed, if not in this life, then in the next. It is sad to me that the majority of Christianity operates at this level.

It certainly is possible that the majority is right and I am totally out in left field. Still, I must stick to my position, because it is this dramatic, if difficult, shift in awareness and values that makes it worth our being the Church of Jesus Christ. If you ask a politician or even many religious people, they will tell you that "Values" are based in moralistic judgments on people's behavior and that the good life comes from comfort, safety, power, and status. These values all are to be found in the superficial layer.

But Jesus teaches us to rely on a different foundation for our values, and that foundation is based in relationship and community. He challenges us to look beyond our narrow, anxiety-based concerns. He teaches us a deeper layer of trust that requires us to be much less grasping and fearful and leads to our being more generous and trusting, instead.

Jesus' prayer on behalf of his disciples is also a prayer on our behalf. And I echo his sentiment. So, live in the world, but don't be deceived by the glitter of the superficial layer. Don't settle for that which cannot ultimately feed your soul. And I encourage you to be a church that offers the deepest hospitality, love, and healthy community in a world that is sorely in need.