

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 14, 2023

Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

The world.

This phrase is used 50 times in the gospel of John. The world is the place that Jesus, the true light, has come into but which did not know him. The world is what God so loved that God sent Jesus into the world to save it. The world is what Jesus is savior of. The world hates Jesus because he testifies that the things it thinks are good are in fact evil. The world hates the followers of Jesus because we have been chosen by God and pulled out of the world. Like Jesus, now, we do not belong to the world.

Jesus is the light of the world. But, in our reading, the world cannot receive him, because it does not have eyes to see or ears to hear. They literally cannot experience Jesus. Because they are estranged from him, alienated from God and living in a separate reality. One that calls good, evil. That calls evil, good. For this reason, as long as the world remains unchanged, it cannot receive God or the Holy Spirit.

The world. It is indeed a strange place for us who are followers of Jesus. Because what the world tells us about what is true is so contrary to what we have learned at the feet of Jesus. As we have walked with him through his ministry. As we have heard the overarching story of God's pursuit of God's people in scripture, from Genesis until now. A story we are part of.

We, who have been baptized, are no longer from the world. For we can see, we do know.

1 Peter reminds us that baptism is not just a washing of dirt from our body. It saves because it brings a transformation of who we are and how we see. So now we know and see things that the world cannot. Through these waters we are no longer alienated from God but see the truth.

Which is?

The truth that Paul expresses to the Athenians as he tells them about the unknown God who he connects to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who created all that exists, who is Father to Jesus, who loves this world. The truth that we are all God's offspring. That we all bear the image of God. Every single human being you lay eyes on from the baby in the crib, to the cop on the street, to the convict behind bars, to the migrant at the border. All bear the image of the God who created them and is deserving of love, respect, basic decency for that reason alone. Jesus knew and lived this, welcoming pharisee and tax collector alike.

Paul calls on those assembled to repent, change their thinking.

For the world, alienated from God, cannot see that truth. Instead, it divides. It says that those who aren't in our tribe. Who don't have the same skin color, or religion, or political party, or political leader, are not worthy of being treated with respect, love, care. Because they are not like us! The world says there is nothing that unites us except those things that we believe, look like, follow, accept. That all that matters is our tribe. Our people. Not them.

Language and belief that leads ultimately to death. Because it binds us to conflict. As we look out only for those who are American, or Democrats, or Iowans, or white, or Cubs fans.

Any time we hear that language, of fundamental division and difference, we should immediately get suspicious, because it's contrary to the witness of Peter, but also Genesis. We are all created in God's image. There is no human being who we lay eyes on who is not created in God's image and deserving of love and respect for that alone.

Jesus, as he normally does, ups the ante in this farewell discourse with his disciples before his ascension into heaven. Here he says you will know these things the world cannot because you have been claimed by God in the waters of baptism. And also, because you have received in those waters the Holy Spirit, the Advocate. This Spirit dwells, lives in you.

Each of you baptized saints, beloved of God, has within you the Holy Spirit of God. In this way each of you is a God bearer. And in that very real way, and because the world knows us as followers of Jesus, we have placed upon us the responsibility to not take that name in vain.

When I talk about that commandment with my confirmands, to not take the name of the Lord our God in vain, I remind them it refers not only to how we speak about God, but also how we live as those who bear God's name. As a Middleswarth, my behavior reflects upon my family, either bringing them honor or shame. So, as Christ-ians, as followers of the God who created all that exists, we bring honor to the name of God when we follow Jesus' commandments.

"If you love me, you'll keep my commandments" Jesus says. The interesting thing in the Gospel of John is that the only commandment Jesus gives is that given on Maundy Thursday. After Jesus washes the disciples' feet. Anyone remember what that is? Well, his commandment is to love one another in the same way Jesus has loved us. This is how people will know we are his disciples.

What it means to see as God sees, not as the world sees, is to see everyone as a beloved creation of God, and to love them in the same self-sacrificial way that God loves us. How? Well, to spend time and money making up a bag of groceries to place at our doors so others can have something to eat. To spend time collecting and delivering those bags. To speak well of others and look at what they do in the best possible way. To treat them with respect.

This is the gift we are given by God in the waters of baptism. To be reformed, changed, so that we can see as God sees. A world filled not with dangerous people, fights to be won, people to be conquered. But instead a world filled with those who are beloved of God. Who bear God's image.

What would it be like to go through this next week, and in those moments when we are tempted to dismiss someone, for their thoughts or actions, because they are not like us, what if we stopped and took a moment to try and see the image of God in them? To look beyond all the outer stuff and peer into who they are.

What would it be like to see the world as a place to discover the wonders of God within those around us. We ourselves have the Holy Spirit within us. That power and energy of God that fuels the growth of the church in the book of Acts. A power given to us in baptism. One that continues to transform us as we make use of it. For the more we see the world as a place to discover God's wonders, the more we will see the world as a place to discover God's wonders.

What a gift to be able to see in this way. To see the wonder and diversity of God's creation as something to be celebrated. To see how connected we all truly are. To see with the eyes of Jesus. The heart of God. The power of the Holy Spirit.

To be a follower of Jesus is just this simple. To love God with all that we are, our time, attention, trust. To see all humans as those created in the image of God and

treat them that way. To love one another in the same way that God in Jesus has loved us.

And being a follower of Jesus is also this difficult. For the world still has its hooks in us. Pulling us away from those things.

So we trust in God's gift to us in baptism. The waters of baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit given to us there that transforms us. Changes us. Empowers us to be able to live in this way.

And as challenging as it can be sometimes. Having tasted both ways of living. I want to live as Jesus did. Seeing the beauty, complexity, wonderful nature of people and this creation.

Don't you?