

Nathan Brown
"In the World, Not of the World"
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West Side Christian Church

John 17:6-19

There is something very tempting about escaping from the world, isn't there? Travel agents, the tourist industry, and the real estate business know this. They spend millions of dollars to lure us to take luxury cruises where our every whim is met, to enjoy fractional ownership in condos at the shore, to buy a second home in the mountains, to live in a gated community where we can leave our work-day pressures behind. Although the images used to sell these retreats reflect our glitzy media world, the human desire for respite from the world and its incessant pressures is as ancient as the Bible.

Christian faith may intensify the desire for escape from the world. Having glimpsed a vision of what is holy and good, having witnessed the power of God's love in our lives, our human spirit may hunger not for the promised splendor of luxury resorts, but for a way of being that avoids the clamor and conflict of the world.

Christian history is filled with these kinds of human arrangements: monasteries, convents, reform movements, communal living, utopias, retreat centers, small groups centered on prayer and piety, attempts to reclaim the practices of primitive Christianity as interpreted by charismatic leaders. While each of these developed its peculiar shape and culture, all of them have been efforts to create a space, unencumbered by the world, that would allow for a fuller realization of a faithful, holy life.¹

I spend the whole year looking forward to one particular escape. Every summer my family goes to Amelia Island, Florida to spend a week at the beach. Not only is it a wonderful time spent with my loved ones, but it is also the place where I find myself the most calm and relaxed. Without failure, the day we leave the beach is the day I begin looking forward to escaping again the following year.

A colleague of mine recently returned from a two-week escape during which she vacationed and retreated with her family. Upon her return, she wistfully said to me, "I wish I could keep this all year." I think I feel that way when I come home from the beach. I think we all feel that way more often than we probably admit.

In fact, I think we try to maintain as much escape as possible all year round, just in smaller, more common ways--television shows, movies, sporting events,

¹ Troeger, Thomas H. Seventh Sunday of Easter: Year B. "Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. 2008. Pg. 545.

surfing the internet, tasty food, a good glass of wine, and even work. We all have our methods for escaping the world.

Escape is not altogether a bad thing. Jesus escaped frequently to spend time in prayer, to have a sense of solitude, and to be temporarily free from the crowds and the responsibilities that were growing for him everyday. This passage comes from one of those times.

Scholars call this passage, Jesus' high priestly prayer. This is thought to be his final prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, before his crucifixion. Jesus has retreated to pray for his disciples, that in his absence, God will protect them, that God will make their joy complete, that they will be made one, and that they will be made holy.

However, in addition to everything else Jesus prays for his disciples in this particular prayer, Jesus includes a couple of phrases about escaping from the world. He says, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, but I have sent them into the world."

I was talking to my brother a couple of days ago. Usually we talk a couple of times a week. However, this past week, I could not seem to get in touch with him. Finally, on Friday, I caught up with him. Chad told me about how he had been out of town and had lost his phone charger. As a result his cell phone battery died. Therefore, everyone had been worried about him because he could not communicate with the world.

He said to me, "Nathan, with my phone, I can do anything. I can call, I can e-mail, I can text message, I can get information from the Internet, I can listen to music, I can be productive, I can respond to the world. Without it these last couple of days, though, I felt naked. I felt lost. It's been weird."

When he said that, it was as if a light bulb went on in my head about Jesus' prayer in this passage and I said to him, "You know, sometimes we have to escape the world in order to be reminded that we do not belong to the world."

Escape from this world, whether it is intentional in the way of a vacation or unintentional in the way of losing one's cell phone is important in order to be reminded that we are not servants of the world. We do not belong to the values and customs of culture and society. We are not owned or protected by what we do or do not do as human beings. Jesus is very clear in his prayer that, "they do not belong to the world." Temporary escape can sometimes give us perspective about this fact.

It appears from Jesus' prayer that temporary escape, though, is not the problem. No, it is the desire to live apart from the world, the desire to be permanently removed from culture and society that is the issue in the community of John. By the end of the first century, as conflict with the authorities increased, the

member's of John's community were understandably attracted to a life of faith that would disengage them from the powers that were opposed to the gospel.

How good it would feel to retreat into their own group, to recall the stories of Jesus, to sense his presence in their meals of bread and wine, to enjoy each other's supportive fellowship, and no longer to have to defend their beliefs and practices in a hostile world. Apparently, the community of John was not much different than we are today. They also were tempted by those thoughts, "We wish we could keep this all year."²

Jesus' prayer, in some ways, causes me to be reminded of the story of Jesus' transfiguration. If you recall, Peter is atop the mountain with Jesus when, all of the sudden, Elijah and Moses appear, and Jesus is transformed into a bright white light. The experience is so profound for Peter that his initial reaction is to say, "Let me build dwellings for all of you so that we can stay atop this mountain."

The problem is not temporary escape. The problem is the allure to remain in our escapes, to dwell in them permanently. It just seems like life would be easier to live at the beach, life would be simpler if we could remain on vacation, life would not be so difficult if we did not have to deal with people we don't like, or circumstances that make us uncomfortable. Faith would be easier if we could just stay within the confines of these walls, right?

However, as soon as Jesus has said, "they do not belong to the world," he follows with "but I have sent them into the world." In other words, while the world is not that which is to control us, the world is also not something from which we are to run. In fact, following Jesus requires engaging culture, it mandates getting mixed up in society. In fact, it calls us to be up to our ears in the world.

I was at a clergy gathering this week with both UCC and Disciple ministers from the Tidewater area. One of the UCC pastors gave a brief meditation on the importance of temporary escape and retreat for ministers. She said, "We ministers are like lobsters. We are the bottom feeders of this world—we dwell with all mess and brokenness of people's lives. We take in all the crud and muck of our culture and our society. This is what makes us so delicious. This is why people like to prey upon us."

No wonder we think to ourselves after a long vacation, "I wish I could keep this all year," because at the end of the day, being sent into this world to do ministry is no walk in the park. It is a messy, broken journey for all of us. And I say "all of us" because we are all ministers. The world has tremendous power to consume and overwhelm us, to the point that we can become tempted to belong to the world.

² Ibid, 546.

Being up to our ears in the world can cause us to think that we cannot be too thin, that we cannot have too many possessions, that we cannot be fulfilled without a particular commodity or product; that we need plenty of meaningless excitement, sex, and violence to be completely fulfilled; that what is most important is our own personal wants and desires, not the needs of those around us.

Being sent into the world means being constantly tempted to believe that we belong to the world, that we must conform to its ways and embrace its wonders. But Jesus reminds us, "They do not belong to world, but I have sent them into the world."

Temporary escape is absolutely necessary. It gives us the space and the perspective we need to be reminded that we do not belong to the world. But permanent escape is never the answer. Spending all day watching television, spending night after night surfing the Internet, working 18-hour days, moving to a remote island, these are not faithful responses to the gospel.

Ministry requires that we be like lobsters; that we get up to our ears in the muck and crud of this world. Our volunteer division from the denomination has coined this, "Getting dirty for Jesus." The world is not something to escape. It is something to engage.

It is in the world where brokenness exists, where pain and suffering thrive. It is in our ministry to this world that the healing, reconciling, love of Jesus Christ can be made known. To be in the world is not to be of the world. For we do not belong to the world. We belong to our God in Jesus Christ.

Amen.