

Gifts You Can't Return

John 17:6-19

As we near the end of the Easter season, we hear Jesus speaking as part of his farewell message to his disciples. He originally spoke these words just before his death, to prepare his friends. These same words have the same special resonance for us now. The disciples have to learn to live in the world without Jesus' physical presence, just as we do.

Listen as Jesus speaks to God about his followers.

'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 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. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. 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. 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. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

A friend of mine tells the story of when she and her husband brought their new born daughter home from the hospital, she says, she was a tiny baby, premature and reluctant to join the world, my parents came to visit. The baby came home from the hospital, and our world exploded with activity, uncertainty, and a distinct lack of sleep. Like many people, I found it all overwhelming. Somehow, they had let me bring this tiny baby home from the hospital ...it seemed impossible to believe. I was pretty sure there was some huge mistake. I was trying to take care of the baby and the house, and I somehow felt a need to prove to my parents that I knew how to be a good parent.

I would spin through the house, full of anxiety, and from time to time my dad would disappear. I always found him sitting by the baby's crib as she slept. In that cloud of uncertainty, he would take a few moments, just to sit, and I always knew that he was praying for the baby. Maybe even for me, too, his own sleepless, overwhelmed baby.

He got what I was missing in my sleepless, anxious haze. This time was a gift. This tiny human being was a gift ...as we all are. Those prayers, she continues, along with many others — have continued to cast a net of care around that baby, who is now in college. Her early years were cushioned by the prayers of her grandparents, along with those of parents and friends.

In a similar way, Jesus was building a wall of care around his disciples as he prepared to leave their presence. They would have to live in the world in a different way, without his daily guidance, without his wise and fiery presence, without the compassion of his touch.

As Jesus talked to God about his disciples, he conveyed that he found them to be a gift from God. "You gave them to me," Jesus said. When we read the gospels, we know that the disciples are, at different times, clueless, vengeful, self-serving, and silly, all mixed in with their love for Jesus. They were not so different from us. After

traveling around with them, seeing their mistakes, seeing how slow they were to understand, he could have been saying to God, “Here they are. I’ve suffered these fools long enough.” But no, Jesus still saw them as a gift.

If Jesus saw these first disciples as a gift, it gives me hope that Christ sees us a gift. Even though we, too, are at times, clueless, vengeful, self-serving, and silly, mixed in with our love for Jesus.

And, if Christ sees us as a gift, we can see each other that way.

Author and professor David Fitch wrote about finding God’s presence, and God’s people at his local McDonald’s. He started out by drinking coffee, and concentrating on grading papers, doing research, and having meetings. McDonald’s was an extension of his office, and he set the agenda. Then a friend of his issued a challenge. The friend suggested that he see the local McDonald’s as a place where God was already at work, apart from anything he was doing. He said, “I was challenged to see this place as a vibrant arena where God was truly present. I was exhorted to enter this place peacefully and be present with every person who came my way, pay attention to all that was going around me, and tend to God’s presence here.”

He changed his routine and began to see McDonald’s differently. He looked up from his computer and his paperwork to see what was going on around him. He said, “As time went on, I started to meet an array of people in surprising conversations. I got to know people struggling to hold on to a job, abused by a spouse, or mistreated by police. I got to know some police themselves. I shared tables regularly with people who lived in cars and vans. I became enmeshed in a network where God was working in people’s lives, and I was swept up into it. I had never been invited into the lives of so many people as I was at this McDonald’s (not even in a church)... I found myself joined with people in prayer, reconciliation, healing, and proclaiming the hope of the gospel. I became a participant in God’s work. I was learning how to be faithfully present to God’s presence. I was catching a glimpse of what faithful presence might look like in the world... I now believe every neighborhood, coffee shop, community center, Black Lives Matter protest march, YMCA, workplace, racial reconciliation village hall meeting, prison, city hall, homeless shelter, MOPS group, labor union hall, and hospital is a potential arena of God’s presence like McDonald’s.”

Jesus invites us to get out in the world and find God there, too. God’s living presence is in the classroom and the office presentation, at the bus stop and any public arena. God’s waiting at the library and the bowling alley and the VFW hall.

This is the last Sunday in the Easter season; this is the time of year when we spend all these weeks thinking about the resurrection. This is the season of God’s triumph over the powers of indifference and apathy, over death and destruction, over loneliness and isolation. God’s power lives in the connections between people. God is present in the people we love, and in the people, we find annoying, in the people we fail to notice at all.

And all of it is a gift, as Jesus reminds us. Through the power of the resurrection, Amen.