

Most of you know one of our sons, his wife and our grandson, William, live on Grand Cayman Island. We have gone there to visit them several times and it is such a wonderful escape each time we go. On various occasions while there, we have done things like watch the annual Batabano parade as people from the island dress in colorful, outlandish costumes, and dance in procession through the streets for a festive carnival celebrating turtles! We have been there for Pirate Week as people parade through town dressed like pirates. We have taken boat rides out to Stingray City which is an area of ocean surrounding a sand bar where we were able to get out of the boat to pet and feed dozens of stingrays circling around us. We have gone on a submarine excursion to view the gorgeous colors of the coral reef. And, we have had multiple delicious meals as we enjoyed time with our kids. These times have provided a memorable respite from normal, ordinary, everyday life. I so miss being able to see them during this pandemic and I realize how such vacation time provides an often necessary, welcome **escape** from routine everyday experience. However, not all forms of escape from the real world are beneficial, helpful, or even healthy.

This human desire to seek escape from the real world is as ancient as human history, and this desire is as old as Christian faith. In fact, religious faith may intensify this desire. For people of faith, once we experience and begin to understand what is holy, set apart and good about life together within the context of Christian community, we tend to want to avoid the clamor and conflict of the greater world. We tend to want to escape and often cocoon ourselves within the safe confines of Christian community while staying away from the major issues that face so many around the globe. For centuries, monasteries, convents, and different types of communal living all testify to this desire to live unencumbered by the world while simply focusing on a faithful, set apart life.

This was the kind of desire John's community was facing as the gospel writer penned the words of the Bible passage we read today. Written at the end of the first century, John's community was facing increasing persecution and conflict with authorities who opposed the gospel message. Many thought that if they could simply stay together and remain in supportive fellowship with each other they would not have to defend their beliefs. Many felt that by living together in such a community where they would remember Jesus' stories and sense his presence in fellowship, in the

communal meals they called the agape feast, and in bread and wine, they would experience a safer way of life as they faced a growing, hostile world.

In today's gospel reading, the disciples, John's faith community, and each one of us get to overhear Jesus' prayer for **all** his followers as he is about to face his own death. On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus speaks words of prayer and promise for **all** his disciples, including each one of us. As he faces his own death, as he faces what John calls his "hour of glory" or his whole purpose for being here, we hear Jesus praying for all who follow him. And what does Jesus pray for? He prays that his followers may find God's support, encouragement, strength, and courage to **face** the challenges that come from living **in** the world and bearing witness **to** the gospel of grace and love that comes from him. And he prays that his followers may be **one** in fellowship with each other **and** with God.

The world was a hostile place for early Christians and, as we have seen so clearly over the past few years as well as throughout this pandemic, the world can be a very difficult, challenging place for us today. The words we hear from Jesus on this day do not sugarcoat the challenges his followers face. Jesus speaks words of **truth** about the world in which we live.

This is a world where war seems to be a constant. This pandemic has taken so many lives. Climate change is looming large on the horizon and is already bringing enormous change to our world. Conspiracy theories abound and far too many people want to believe falsehoods, not acknowledge known truths, and trust their own uninformed opinions instead of trusting in science and proven scientific fact. Terrorism is an increasing threat right here in our own country. Poverty is very real and present in our own community, throughout this country and around the globe. Thirteen million children are food insecure right here in America, one of the richest countries in the world. Hunger is a monumental challenge around the world. We have seen through our pantry projects how hunger is a challenge right here in our own Okemos community. Over the past few years, our culture has been become increasingly dysfunctional as we have experienced extreme polarization in thinking and beliefs. Racism is present in almost every system and structure. The rage and anger people feel is palpable. Yes, the world is a difficult place and Jesus does not deny that. In today's reading, we hear him speak words of **truth** about what the disciples will face. And, as we move out of this pandemic, begin to again gather, and move into a different kind of normal, we who call ourselves Christian also need to speak words of **truth** about what we face in 2021.

Jesus' words provide his followers with **no** escape from life's difficulties. His words to the Father are, "I am **not** asking you to take them **out** of the world, but I ask you to **protect** them from the evil one." He asks for God's protection and support **against** all the evils of the world for **all** his followers. Jesus does **not** promise us exemption from the struggles of life, but he **does** promise and assure us that we are not alone in the struggle. And, instead of retreating from the world, Christ offers us an alternative model that can empower us to live **in** the world without succumbing to its values and pressures. We are to live **amid** all the knotted complexities without getting ourselves entangled. Friends, we are enabled to live this way as we immerse ourselves **in** God's word, in God's action **through** the living Word, and as we are fed with the nourishment of Jesus' very life through weekly Word and Sacrament. When we do this, we live into the gift of unity that is God-given! And, as we live this way, God reorients our yearnings for escape from the world as the truth of God's word is revealed **in** and **through** the very real stuff of the world, the **needs** of the world.

As Jesus' prayer continues, we then hear a great crescendo as he says, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have **sent them** into the world." This is a very powerful phrase because the words "sent **into** the world" are the exact opposite of escaping **from** or "getting *out*" of the world.

This verse in today's gospel is patterned on Jesus' own life and calls the church to follow his example by becoming **engaged with** the world in all its distorted powers and pressures.

Yes, we do live in a difficult and often painful world. And, we can at times become exhausted, even feel despair as we view and experience people's pain and watch ceaseless violence and corruption both here and around the world. This feeling can cause us to want to stay cocooned within our own homes and our own safe community, not addressing the needs of the world. However, Jesus' words today tell us we have been **sent to bear witness** to the **truth** that **God loves this whole world**, broken as it is. We have been promised Christ's presence **with** us and **to** us as we vitally and faithfully become fully engaged with the needs and wounds of this world, and as we bear Christ's creative, redeeming Word and God's healing love **to** this world. As we begin to again gather in-person and come together as a community of Faith, we come to be made **one**, to receive God's gift of unity, and to be energized and fed by the **truth** of God's redeeming Word. And, we are called **not** to escape, but to do the necessary work so that **all** people might have more abundant life, life that truly matters, right here and right now.