

Seventh Sunday of Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
16 May 2021

John 17:6-19

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, met with his advisors to discuss a proposal from Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of Israel. One of his advisors said, "Your Eminence, Mr. Netanyahu wants to challenge you to a game of golf to show the ecumenical spirit shared by the Jewish and Anglican faiths." The Archbishop thought this was a good idea, but he had not held a golf club in his hand in many years. "Don't we have a Bishop to represent me?" he asked. "None that plays very well," the advisor replied. "But" he added, "there is a Roman Catholic man named Jack Nicklaus, an American. We can offer to make him an Anglican Bishop and then ask him to play Mr. Netanyahu as your personal representative. In addition to showing our spirit of cooperation, we'll also win the match." Everyone agreed it was a good idea. The call was made and Nicklaus, who has many Anglican and Episcopal relatives, was honored and agreed to play. The day after the match, Nicklaus called the Archbishop to report the result. "I have some good news and some bad news," he said. "Tell me the good news first, Bishop Nicklaus," said the Archbishop. "Well, I don't like to brag, but even though I've played some pretty terrific rounds of golf in my life; this was the best I have ever played, by far. I must have been inspired from above. My drives were long and true, my irons were accurate and purposeful, and my putting was perfect. With all due respect, my play was truly miraculous. "There's bad news?" the Archbishop asked. "Yes," Nicklaus sighed. "I lost by three strokes to Rabbi Tiger Woods."

There are some who want to win at all costs and by any means. Winning, however this looks like, becomes the very purpose of their lives. You win when you have the most money. You win when you have the prettiest spouse or the coolest toys. You win when you are recognized by all and when you are famous for being famous. The list goes on. Now, when was the last time you wondered about the purpose of your life? Homer said the following centuries before Christ was even born: "We are insignificant mortals, who are as leaves are, and now flourish and grow warm with life, and feed on what the ground gives, but then again fade away and are dead." This realization that life is short leads all of us into a variety of answers to the questions, "Who are we?" and "What are we here for?" Questions about identity and purpose are questions about the meaning of life. These are basic questions that all generations have asked and have attempted to answer. We can even say that Jesus himself asked this question in the Gospel passage we have today. Jesus and his disciples are in the upper room, right after the last supper. Jesus knows that he is about to die, and he takes a few minutes to pray to God, the Father, for those disciples God himself has given him. It is within the context of this prayer that Jesus tells us what the meaning of life is. This prayer, which is often called Jesus' "Priestly prayer" begins several verses before our passage, at chapter 17:1.

Jesus starts by giving us the answer to our questions right from the start. In verse 3 of the prayer he says, “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and your son, Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” The purpose of life is to know God and to have a relationship with him and with his Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. This has been the single most important element of Christ’s mission on earth: to make his Father known. The purpose of our life is to belong and to be in relationship with God, to know and make God known.

Jesus says, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the World.” The disciples are a gift from God to the Son, in the same way that Jesus himself is a gift from God to the world. To discover the purpose of life is to discover that we are God’s gift to Christ and as such we are loved by God. The gift does not determine what the purpose of their life is, rather, that purpose is determined by the receiver of the gift. Let us say you receive a beautiful hammer for your personal tool kit, but your spouse sees it and believes it would make a wonderful meat tenderizer. In fact, you use this hammer in your kitchen for years. Is this a hammer or is this a meat tenderizer? Well, to the untrained eye, to the world, it is a hammer, but to your wife it very much is a meat tenderizer. The gift does not determine its own purpose. The purpose is given by the one who receives the gift. In this sense, life is not about us, but about Christ. Our purpose in life is determined by the one to whom we are given as a precious gift.

This has been Jesus’ message all along. Ironically, recognizing that life is not about us, but about what God is doing in us, separates the disciples from those in their world. Jesus uses the word, “Cosmos” or “World” in three different ways by using three different articles to illustrate this point. Jesus says that the disciples are “in” the world, they do not belong “to” the world, and yet, Jesus must send them “into” the world. It is this affirmation that underscores the necessity of the prayer. The purpose of life of those disciples given by God to Christ is to be sent into the world to be in the world, without belonging to the world. They were created for the ultimate purpose of being sent.

The first meaning of “world” has to do with a geographical location. The disciples “live on the planet” and will continue to live on planet earth, but Jesus will no longer live here. They are in the world, like you and I are in Houston. The disciples belong to a particular culture, a particular nation, a particular family. They live in a physical place, and in a particular time in history. This is the meaning of the word “World” in this sense.

The second meaning of “world” is no longer a geographical location, but rather the system of practices and standards associated with a secular society. This is better understood as “worldview.” The disciples do not belong to the world because their worldview has become vastly different to the worldview of first century Palestine. Many first century people, in much the same way we are, are primarily concerned with money, belonging, fame or honor, power, influence, and pleasure. For them this is the purpose of life. Jesus says today that the disciples have been “set-apart” from this worldview. They are driven by a command to love God and to love each other as Christ has loved them.

They now know they are loved by God, who created them for God's loving pleasure. They no longer belong to their world.

The third definition of "World" has to do with a geographical location as well as with the people who inhabit this location. God sent Jesus and sends us into the world to be among the people of the world. The prayer is not for God to help the disciples escape the world and all the pain and sin that it produces. Jesus says, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." Jesus had protected his beloved disciples, and now as he faces the end of his mission, he asks God to protect them. Jesus knows that the world will hate the disciples because they dance at the sound of a different drum, they do not truly belong anymore. Not because they are morally superior to the world necessarily, but because they chose to live by a different set of rules. Wealth, fame, power, and pleasure were no longer the big attraction for them.

My friends, the purpose of our life is not determined by us, but rather it is determined by God through Jesus Christ. The disciples are no longer propelled by their own power, but rather by God's power and protection. Jesus makes it clear that sanctification is not our doing, but rather it is a gift from God. Jesus prays, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." It is God who makes us holy (sanctification.) Christ tells us today that sanctification is not something we do, but something God does for us. The purpose of our life is not to become morally superior or spiritually righteous. The purpose of our life is to determine who belongs to God and who does not. Rather, our purpose is to be absolutely dependent on God's love and God's mercy. To be open to his saving action in our lives.

And there are a few things that happen when we are totally open to God's will for our lives, (1) We recognize and admit our sinfulness, and we do not have to cover up or rationalize our mistakes. We do not have to pretend to be more perfect or righteous than we are. (2) We recognize and accept the fact that God has forgiven all our sins. We do not have to wallow in our mistakes. We live in the freedom of forgiveness. And we love God and others as a result of this freedom.

The purpose of our life is to have a loving relationship with God and with Jesus Christ. Jesus affirms that everything we have is given to us by God and this is the starting point in our Christian life. He affirms that as Christians we are to be in the world, but we are to have a world-view that is not based on wealth, fame, power, and pleasure but on love of God and love of others. As disciples we are sent into the world to love the world as Christ himself has loved us. We are not alone in our journey, however. God is and will be our protection along the way, as he is the one who separates us for service, commissions us for that service and sanctifies us along the way. He is the one whose love is the very purpose of our lives. Amen!