

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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John 17:6-19 Bearing The Cross of Jesus

Today marks the 7th Sunday of Easter, the Sunday after Ascension Day and before Pentecost Sunday, a period of reflection for all Christians. Additionally, this Monday we as a nation celebrate Memorial Day and as a congregation will reconvene at the end of the 10:15a service out on the lawn by the flagpole for the Men's Fellowship service. Our readings of Scripture today bring us into deep reflection on God's love for us as a people. Our reading from Psalm 1 tells us that "*God watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish*". Yes, as we encounter the "world" each and every day, we are stunned by the ways in which human free will runs amok with often catastrophic consequences for all of God's people.

The reading from the Gospel of John [17:6-19] extends our reflection in a new dimension, one that quite unique for we are listening to Jesus in prayer with God, praying for His followers. As we ponder these beautiful words, we first may ask ourselves, "Why does Jesus pray to God on behalf of His followers?" Only as we move through the entire prayer do we begin to discern an answer to this question. In verse 9, Jesus speaks to God, "*I am praying on their behalf.*" Verse 11 continues, "*I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you.*" In verses 16-18, Jesus continues, "¹⁶*They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.* ¹⁷*Sanctify^[b] them by the truth; your word is truth.* ¹⁸*As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*

The focus of Jesus' prayer is the sanctification of God's people. Just what does Jesus mean by God's "sanctification"? If you're familiar with John Wesley's Methodism you might interpret this to be people driving towards "perfection". The Holiness movement of the mid 19th C also spoke at great lengths about sanctification by the Holy Spirit, a process that required joint

participation to achieve sanctification towards that of Jesus Christ. The Scripture informs us that God had sanctified Jesus, had set Jesus apart from the world, to serve the world with devotion to the Almighty. Jesus was truly not of this world, but dwelt in the world, the Word dwelt among us. But during his tenure in the world, Jesus had a heavy cross to bear. As He foretells his followers, soon Jesus shall be leaving them. He must fulfill the Scriptures and not only bears the cross, but endures death on the Cross. In becoming the God-of-the-Cross, Jesus fulfilled two major roles in the coming of the Kingdom of God. (i) Through His sanctification, his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ becomes the first fruits of God. (ii) Through His defeat of death and the promise of everlasting life, Jesus Christ enables us to be His first fruits. We die with Jesus on the Cross; we are resurrected in Jesus Christ into a New Being, or as the Apostle Paul describes it, we are transformed into a New Creature. Jesus was sanctified, marked by God, to be the first fruits. We, my friends, are sanctified, set aside for service to God, to become the continual first fruits of Jesus in service to God the Father.

So, let us compare and contrast the very first fruits of Jesus Christ, our 1st C disciples, to those of our current first fruits of Jesus, i.e., 21st C disciples of Christ, especially those in service to our nation. We can discern a great deal in 4 areas of comparison. (1) **Acceptance:** the 1st C disciples were rejected by their world. Today, I proffer that we too as Christians are rejected by a world, just as filled with sin. (2) **Isolation:** the 1st C disciples were isolated from their Temple, scattered when the Shepherd was struck, and in transition to the New Being. Today, we often suffer by isolation. Sometimes we suffer in isolation or estrangement that we create ourselves. Or in the extreme, there is suffering for our people in military service, a forced isolation to places alien, unfriendly, and often dangerous. Among our congregation there are those, who like members of my family, can recall Belgium, Germany, France, or the Pacific

theaters of WW2, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and the on-going wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In all of these situations, there is isolation from home, from the security of a civil society, and from those whom we love. (3) **Challenges:** for the 1st C disciples, life was filled with seemingly insurmountable problems. Jesus had foretold them that soon they would be without Him, the Shepherd would be struck and the flock would scatter. Today, both in everyday life and especially for those called upon to serve in the military there indeed are many of the same challenges, just amplified to the absolute extreme edge of life. More than 2 million American soldiers have or are serving in the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan. As of April 1st, more than 360,000 American soldiers have returned to civilian life with serious to catastrophic brain injuries. On the personal side, most of my family would not speak of their challenges. When I was a child, my Uncle Billy, a Marine, only told me that August 7th, 1942 landing on Guadalcanal was “the longest day of my life”. When asked about further details of his service, later capture, and time as a prisoner of war he only said “Forgiveness was the key”, something I did not understand for years. War indeed is Hell. (4) **Confronting Death:** the 1st C disciples of Jesus confronted death, as Jesus had foretold them and death did come to many of the Jesus followers. From the American Revolution to the current wars, more than 43 million American soldiers have served, more than 2 million wounded or died in the theaters of war. One of my childhood friends Wally Bengston was such a person. His family were long-standing members of my Congregational Church, so we went to school together, to church together, to fellowship, to Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and Explorers together. Wally went away to Phillips Exeter Academy, graduated early and went to Harvard. That year the draft was controlled by a lottery, but Wally decided it was better to join up, than wait around to be drafted. Only when I was away in graduate school did I learn from my parents that Wally had been was killed in action, although little information was forthcoming. Only last week did I learn from a detailed search of the web that Wally had joined the Army to fly with the 1st Air Calvary. That’s what he wanted, that’s what he achieved. In his second tour of duty, Wally, a decorated helicopter pilot, was shot down and killed over Cambodia. Both of Wally’s younger brothers joined up in the wake of his death. His younger brother Johnathan was killed in action; his brother David was called back from the war zone, he being the “surviving son”. What all of us know is that such circumstances were not the exceptions, but the rule,

then and now. I know of this painful example of a person who was a close friend, but you all I am sure have similar stories. We all have too many of such stories of the fallen.

Our Christian beliefs are strained by war time. We know in our hearts we follow Jesus. When asked what is the Greatest Commandment [Matt 22:24-40], Jesus tells us “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*”³⁸ *This is the first and greatest commandment.* ³⁹*And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*⁴⁰ *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*” Jesus understood all too well that there was profound evil in the “world”. Our Scripture readings tell us that, like Jesus, we all are sanctified by God, marked by Him to serve. Jesus sought **strength** in God, His prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane give us direction. Now in our reading we find Jesus praying for his disciples, both then and now. Jesus prays to God on our behalf, ¹⁷*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.* In our sanctification, as first fruits of Jesus Christ, we are marked by God and become His through Jesus Christ, in the New Being afforded us by the death and resurrection of the God-of-the-Cross. Jesus prays, ¹⁸*As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world*”. In being sanctified, gathered into the New Being of Jesus Christ, we fundamentally are no longer of this “world” or war, sin, and estrangement, but are sent into this world to share the Good News that Christ is risen. It was not for years after by Uncle Billy’s comments about forgiveness that I came to understand that he was not taking about the forgiveness for those whose actions sent him into the battlefield, but also forgiveness that he prays for himself. Over the years that understanding has brought great comfort to me as a Christian. Remarkably, on my search of the web concerning Wally Bengston I found a tribute to him by several of his fellow soldiers, but also from a Frank Walter Bengston, Jr. (Minh Chow Le) Myoi who was born to Wally’s Vietnamese wife, immigrated as a child, and was raised in the United States of America. Although he never had the opportunity to meet his father, he learned about him from Wally’s friends, parents, and soldiers in arms. Forgiveness, compassion, and love for one another are core themes of Christian belief. We are sent into this world, sanctified by God as first fruits of Jesus Christ, often confronted with the challenges of the world. For those who serve in the theaters of war, tensions remain in reflection. For those family members and citizens who support the American soldier in their duty, we as Christians

confront the darkest side of this “other” world into which we are sent. We must honor the service, the sacrifice, and memories of our people who serve this nation with selfless effort. We thank God for the lives of this congregation that served, but were spared in these theaters. We think of Matt Hertl, a Black Hawk helicopter pilot now returned to Texas, for whom we pray God’s grace shower down and keep him safe. For all of our veterans we pray God’s grace shower down.

Let me close with some suggestions to consider on this Memorial Day Observance weekend. We all can do more to recognize, honor, and help our veterans. You may know of veterans in the community, or you may know them on sight by the wounds (both physical and to their psyche) that are slow to heal. These brave souls are in our midst; our very freedoms are a product of their service to the nation.

First, reach out to them to first say “Hi” and welcome them. Second, thank them for the sacrifices that they have made to protect our freedoms. Third, take the time to listen to the stories that they might share with you. Active listening is a powerful balm to those traumatized by war. In so doing, we respond to Jesus’ prayer to God on our behalf, “¹⁸As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world”. Let us see ourselves as the first fruits of Jesus Christ. When freely giving of our love, consideration, and blessings, we recognize our sanctification by God in Jesus Christ and thank and bless those who have given so much, lost so much, and earned our unending thanks.

Let us pray.

Closing prayer

O Almighty God,

As we remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom, we think of how they have followed in the footsteps of your only son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We ask that You hold our service men and women in Your providence. Cover them with your sheltering grace and presence as they stand in the gap for our protection.

Remember also dear Lord the families of our troops. We ask for your unique blessings to fill their homes; for your peace, provision and strength to fill their hearts.

May the members of our armed forces be filled with courage to face each day. May they find truth and trust in the Lord's mighty power to accomplish all things. May they be sanctified by You, Almighty God. Let our military brothers and sisters feel Thy love and support, and also our love and support.

These prayers we ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.