

Still in the World

Sunday, May 17, 2026

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

John 17:1-11

It is a strange phenomenon of our time, that we date things pre-COVID and post-COVID. For instance: pre-COVID restaurants and shops stayed open late, but post-COVID everything is shuttered by 9:00 PM. Pre-COVID people shopped in malls, but post-COVID people shop online. Pre-COVID we scheduled meetings and travelled long distances to sit in the same conference room, but post-COVID we meet over ZOOM, from our homes, wearing our pajamas. Many things changed with COVID. Not all the changes were positive, but there is one change I do appreciate: the ability to work remotely from home or in a coffee house or anywhere there is a Wi-Fi signal.

In the post-COVID world, businesses strategize how to get employees back to the office, a process still evolving today. Millions of workers tasted the strange freedom of being “at work but not at the office.” We learned how to collaborate through screens and how to be productive on non-traditional schedules. The pandemic taught us that presence can be real even when bodies are apart. The paradox of being absent-yet-present, of being remote-yet-real helps us hear anew Jesus’ words: “I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world” (John 17:11).

Jesus prayed this “high-priestly prayer” on the night before his death, in the upper room, before going to Gethsemane. Jesus prayed this prayer between the table and cross, between the world he loved and the glory to which he was about to return. Jesus did this to prepare his disciples for a new kind of presence. He would soon be gone from their sight but not gone from their lives. His work would continue, but now the disciples would be doing the heavy lifting.

Jesus knows that his departure will cause some separation anxiety and raise more than a few unanswered questions. His response in John 17, meant to allay that anxiety and to address those concerns, is not a lecture but a *prayer*, and that distinction matters. Before Jesus sends the disciples out into the world, he intercedes on their behalf. His prayer reveals how those who follow and believe in him can live faithfully in a world where Jesus is unseen. His prayer shows how faith operates in what pastor/author Eugene Peterson calls “the colony of heaven in the country of death.” Jesus’ prayer raises the issue of what it means to remain “in” the world, while at the same time being not “of” the world.

So, let me make four observations that may help us to grasp the deeper meaning of this prayer. **The Work Continues** (vv. 1-5). “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that

the Son may glorify you” (v. 1). At the opening of the prayer, Jesus names what is about to happen as *glory*. Not escape. Not tragedy. Glory! In John’s gospel, glory is not divine fireworks, but God’s love revealed at full throttle. In a sort of divine deception, the defeat of the cross becomes a stunning victory for Jesus. God’s master plan is the radiant disclosure of Jesus as a self-giving Savior whose love for the world defeats sin and death. What the world dismisses, God exalts. What the world mocks, God glorifies.

Jesus then says, “You have given [me] authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given [me]” (v. 2). The one who prays already reigns and defines eternal life not as endless duration but as everlasting relationship: “that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (v. 3). The first truth of living “still in the world” is that *the work continues because the relationship continues*. The disciples will not be orphaned employees after the boss leaves the building; they will carry out the same mission under the same authority. Which is why when we are about to lose sight of Jesus, when the headlines darken with false narratives built on questionable facts, when our personal road becomes steep, it is good for us to remember that the work of God’s kingdom is not ours to invent. It is Christ’s work that continues through us. The work is ours because we belong to Jesus.

The Gift of Belonging (vv. 6-8). Jesus says, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me...They were yours, and you gave them to me” (v. 6). Before they *do* anything, the disciples *belong*. Their identity precedes their activity. This is a vital correction in an anxious age where we often imagine faith as freelance work with each believer hustling for results and managing their own spiritual metrics. Jesus speaks the opposite: “They were yours, and you gave them to me.” *We belong to Jesus before we are ever asked to perform*.

This notion (among others) is what saved Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl when he was in the concentration camps. Frankl’s work on “meaning” as the key to a purposeful life was already well under way, and his experience in the camps reinforced his view that connection to others and community are crucial pathways to discovering and fulfilling one’s life purpose. We belong to Jesus first, as part of his faith family, before we become agents of God’s reign.

We all like to belong. It’s one of our basic needs. For the disciples, as for us, belonging is the soil from which obedience grows. Because they belong, the disciples can receive what Jesus gives: the words of the Father, the truth of the mission, and the call to faith. “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” (v. 8).

Belonging is what allows us to live *in* the world without being *of* the world. When we know to whom we truly belong, we no longer need to chase every false identity the world offers. A disciples' security does not depend on popularity, productivity, or performance, but on our *relationship with Jesus*: "They were yours, and you gave them to me" (v. 6). To be given to Christ is to have a center that the culture cannot steal. To belong to Christ means we can engage in the world's work, enjoy its beauty, and grieve its pain without letting any of it define us. Belonging grounds us in the heart of God, the very God who placed us *in* the world as living evidence of what it means to be loved, kept, and sent.

Kept in the Name (vv. 9-11). Here the prayer becomes intercession: "Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (v. 11). The two great requests are *protection* and *unity*, and both are grounded in the "name." In Scripture, the "name" means the revealed character of God who is truthful, steadfast, merciful, and loving. To be kept in that name is to be held within God's own steadfast Self.

When Jesus prays for our protection, he is not asking God to bubble-wrap our lives. Rather, Jesus prays for something deeper: not protection *from* the truth, but protection *by* the Truth. Jesus means being protected *by the truth* when the world's lies are so loud and so pervasive. Jesus means being protected *by courage* when fear crowds in, and of being protected *by endurance* when faith feels thin. He has already promised the coming Advocate, the Spirit of truth, who will "guide you into all the truth" (16:13). This is Truth, capital "T." The Spirit is the safeguard of every believer, not by keeping us untouched by the world, but by keeping us faithful within it, anchoring us in God's reality when everything else wobbles.

Jesus also prays for *unity*. Unity, like protection, is a gift with a purpose. Unity is the shared life of those who are kept in the same name: this is unity of the Father and Son extended into a community of forgiven people. Unity is the miracle of difference held together by love. In an age of polarization, when disagreement so easily hardens into contempt, Jesus' prayer sounds subversive. The credibility of the gospel, Jesus suggests, depends on people who can share some love across their differences.

Such unity begins with listening. Before Jesus sends his followers out, he prays for them. Before the church speaks to the world, it must hear the Word that forms it. Listening is the first act of faith. The church's first posture in a noisy, reactive world should be attentiveness with ears open and heart steady, waiting for God's direction. To be "kept in the name" means allowing God's character to shape the way we speak, post, decide, act, and pray. Unity is born not of perfect agreement but of shared attention to the One True voice. When

we listen together to God, we find ourselves, despite everything, speaking the same language of grace.

The Paradox of Presence (v. 11). "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world" (v. 11). Herein lies the paradox that defines our experience as Christians. *Jesus' bodily absence becomes the condition for his spiritual presence*. His departure is not abandonment but expansion. The Father will send the Spirit, and through the Spirit, Christ will be present everywhere his disciples go. The church is called to a kind of holy hybrid life: to be present in the world but rooted in heaven. We inhabit classrooms and kitchens, clinics and conference rooms, not as tourists or escapists but as residents of another realm whose presence transforms the neighborhood.

In their book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon describe Christians as "resident aliens": people who live within the culture yet answer to a different Authority; people whose loyalties run deeper than nationality or ideology and whose lives point to another homeland. As resident aliens, we must wear the character of Christ in a public way. When we are generous in a stingy culture, truthful in a manipulative one, or reconciling in a divided one, then the world at least has a chance, even if it is the slightest of chances, to catch a glimpse of the unseen Christ.

We don't carry Jesus into our workplaces and neighborhoods as if Jesus were absent; we discover that Jesus is already there, waiting to be recognized. Wherever you find yourself this week, in the lab or the classroom, the checkout line or the family kitchen, practice *presence over performance*. Listen more than you speak. Be attentive to the person in front of you. Offer grace. And when the noise of the world grows loud, echo Jesus' prayer: "Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." That prayer is still being answered in every believer who stays faithfully in the world for the world's sake. Jesus has not left the work; he has left the work in good hands, yours and mine, kept in his name, sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You that You sent Jesus into the world to save us from our sin, to enable all who believe in Him be witnesses to the truth of Your Word and to become ministers of reconciliation. I pray that all who are called by Your name would be knit together in the unity of the Spirit and be united in the truth of the glorious gospel of grace. Use us to tell a lost world of God's wonderful plan of redemption, through the finished work Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

Sources

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