

John 17:6-19

Jesus said, "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.*

In not Of - May 16, 2021

John 15:9-17

It seems more and more, the concept of truth has become optional. From members of the House of Representatives claiming that the insurrectionists on January 6 were just regular capitol tourists, to those who deny that there is a problem with racial equality in our country, to anti-vaxxers claiming Bill Gates now knows where we all live 24/7 because we received the Covid vaccine, the list goes on and on and on.

Lies, liars, and lying, of course, are not new to this day and age. I mean God prohibited lying in the 10 Commandments yet it goes on. However, what seems different about lying in the 21st century is that people continue to lie, even when there is a mountain of evidence to counter their claims.

Let me read to you a description of what Adolf Hitler defined as the “Big Lie” as described by the American Office of Special Services during World War II. It’s a phrase bandied about by all sides in today’s political debate.

Hitler’s primary rules were: never allow the public to cool off; never admit a fault or wrong; never concede that there may be some good in your enemy; never leave room for alternatives; never accept blame; concentrate on one enemy at a time and blame him for everything that goes wrong; people will believe a big lie sooner than a little one; and if you repeat it frequently enough people will sooner or later believe it.

Do these techniques sound familiar? Of course they do. The lesson Hitler has taught the world is “go big or go home.” It doesn’t matter whether you are on the left or right of the political debate. It doesn’t matter whether you are a Hollywood star trying to cover up for your infidelities. It doesn’t matter if you are a corporation trying to defend yourself against a defective product. The key to survival is to vehemently deny the claims of the other side, using the most exaggerated language possible. Why? Because let’s face it, most people, when confronted with the truth, know at some level our accusers are right. Most people have an inkling of conscience which prevents them from ferociously responding to being caught out in a lie. Being confronted with the truth is like a being physically pierced with a sword. We are wounded, we are hurt, we are bleeding — not physically but mentally and spiritually. Therefore, most lack the energy to respond in kind. Yes, the old observation that wounded animals can be far more dangerous than healthy ones can be correct. However, wounded animals are not wounded because of their own lies. They fight because they are being subjected to pain and suffering they did not deserve. They are angry and justified in being angry. Human liars who are caught can put up a front for awhile, but eventually most of us can’t sustain our capacity for lying for the long run. Nonetheless, there are some who can completely separate themselves from their lies and keep on attacking and denying regardless of

the truth. Their plan is simple: their lies, forcefully presented, relentlessly pursued, never denied, triumph because they exhaust the other side. Lies and liars win because they persist in spite of the truth. And because of that persistence truth often begins to question itself.

The problem with truth-tellers is that naively believe that because the facts are on their side, they will win. Truth-tellers simply cannot muster the anger and ferocity of the liars of the world because they don't think they need to. The liars of the world often win because they outlast the truth-tellers, people who are continually surprised that the world accepts lies as truth because lies are shoved down our throats whereas truth-tellers often present their arguments gently like a mother nursing her baby.

But this is the way of the world. Dr. King expressed it well when he said that the only thing it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.

And this is where we are as the Church of Jesus Christ in 2021. We are, for the most part, just a bunch of nice people bumbling and stumbling our way around largely indifferent or unwilling to confront the many, many lies on which the world is built. The time has come for this congregation and the church as a whole to ask ourselves who we are and what we are about because the real truth is, my friends, that the world is winning and winning big time.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Is there any significance to our claiming Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior when most of the world couldn't care less? Sure many "celebrate" Christmas, whatever that means. Many might attend church services on Easter. But for most people who participate in these holidays, do they really mean anything to them?

Over the years congregations of all varieties have succeeded in constructing for themselves some very nice buildings. Church architecture is beautiful and spans centuries of human art and creativity. No doubt that people who erect church buildings poured mountains and time and effort and money into these edifices in order to express their dedication to God.

But then what? I mean, what are our buildings for? Why do we build such beautiful buildings anyway? To boast about our wealth to the neighborhood? To compete for the title of nicest building or best landscaping? Is that what we are about? The building in which we meet once a week?

Friends, if that is all we are, just a building, then does it really make a difference whether we exist as a congregation proclaiming Jesus Christ and his gospel or not? There are plenty of organizations out there: businesses, governments, theaters and banks which also have very nice buildings and all of them are very much part of this world. They are part of the fabric of existence. They all have a function, from commerce to administration to entertainment.

But Jesus says the church is different. Our scripture today comes from the final prayer Jesus offered on behalf of his disciples just before he went to Jerusalem to face his trial crucifixion suffering and death.

In this prayer, Jesus is asking God to protect his followers, telling God and them that he has taught them everything, sharing the good news and empowering them to go forth and spread that good news all over the world.

In doing so, he makes an important distinction for his followers, a distinction which is still essential today. Jesus tells God and reminds his followers, in other words, us, that while we are in the world we are not of the world. In the world, but not of the world. That was them back then. It is us today.

In and of, such little words - such important differences.

Jesus made a huge distinction between being of the world versus being in the world and we need to understand that distinction today. In fact the distinction between in and of is what makes our faith relevant and mandates why we are still here.

Question: How do we decide what truth is? How do we decide what is right and what is wrong? How do we decide in our own lives what choices to make? If we claim to follow Jesus Christ, then his life, examples, and teachings are the lens through which we understand the world and how to act. It is scripture that guides us in our choices, just as it guided Jesus, just as it guided the disciples.

Christians have a standard to follow and that standard is Jesus Christ. The better we know and understand him, who he is and why he did what he did and said, the better choices we make in our lives. Let's face it, friends, many many people say they are Christian. They celebrate Christmas and Easter. They may even show up at church once in a while. But honestly, do they really know Jesus Christ? Do they understand the significance of his birth, his life, his teachings, his words, his challenging the authorities, his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion, and yes, his resurrection? Does the life of Jesus really make a difference to most who claim to be his followers or are they just nice stories trotted out once a year?

For his followers, being in the world but not of the world implies a detachment from what most people consider to be important and what we don't. I mean big houses, nice cars, exciting vacations, and all the rest are nice, but hardly necessary to living a good and fulfilling life. Wearing the latest fashions or being up-to-date on the latest gossip may generate some fleeting pleasure, but wearing nice clothes or indulging in the scandals afflicting the rich and famous are hardly meaningful.

We all live in this world. We were born here and someday we will leave it. While we are here, God invites and encourages us to enjoy the marvels and beauty of creation. God created everything and God created it to be good. Therefore, why would we not celebrate the fundamental goodness of creation?

Nevertheless, the story of scripture reflects the essential condition of humanity. We humans, when given the choice, will tend to reject that which is best for each other and glorifies God and replaces it with whatever brings pleasure, power, wealth, and fame to ourselves. The history of the world can be summarized in the stories of people at all levels of society who put themselves and their interests ahead of others with the results being disastrous for themselves and for others. Not always in the short run. Not even, sometimes, in the long run. But self-centered humanity, propelled by the many big lies that we believe, has brought the human race to disaster after disaster, over and over again.

What is the corrective to all this madness? How might we human beings escape the cycle of lies and power and cheating and destruction and death?

Jesus Christ came to us to demonstrate a better way of life and living. Where many talk of hate and revenge, Jesus spoke only of love and restoration. Where many talk of money and power, Jesus spoke of having enough for our daily needs and the glory of serving one another. Where many perpetuate endless lies in order to save themselves, Jesus spoke truth to power, risking and indeed losing his own life to defeat once and for all the evil foundation on which this world is built.

That is why Jesus states that his followers are not of this world. We cannot be. We cannot allow ourselves to be active, willing participants in the power-driven, wealth-loving, people-hating, creation-destroying ways embraced by or at least accepted by the bulk of human beings.

No, Jesus calls us to be different. Jesus calls us to reject the standards and ways of this world and replace them with his. The question for every one of us is whether Jesus' way is better or the ways of the world are better. To me, the answer is obvious. What have the ways of the world bought us? Yes, in this nation, quite a few are well off compared with most of the world. But what is the price paid to achieve our standard of living? Who has suffered? Who has been deprived? How has the planet been damaged? How many of died?

Somewhere, somehow, in this human swamp of hunger, warfare, disease, and death, there must be an alternative. There has to be a better way. There have to be people who dare to be different, who dare to challenge the status quo who choose to love God and each other more than themselves.

That is us. The different ones. The ones in but not of the world. Let us never forget who we are as Christ's church and whose we are as followers of Jesus. Together, we can change the world!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.