**It’s All Good; It’s All God’s**

**Text: John 17:11**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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He sat across the table from me, drinking a cup of coffee: rough beard, dirty clothes, blood-shot eyes; and he didn’t smell real good either. The man was homeless; that was clear enough. But as he told his story, it was clear that he was so much more than a homeless man hiding behind a made-up name. He was a Vietnam veteran. And he told me tales about leading patrols and engaging the enemy; about taking risks in order to protect his men. But not only that. He also told stories about coming home and being ridiculed for having served in ‘Nam; about drinking to dull the pain; about being fired from job after job, and finally ending-up on the street.

Over the years I’ve met many Vietnam veterans with similar tales. They served their country with courage and honor. Only to be rejected by their country for political and economic and ideological reasons.

And I bear some of the blame. As a high school student I demonstrated against the Vietnam War. And I suppose that in those years of youthful ignorance I looked down my self-righteous nose on anyone who would actually serve in that awful war. Now I don’t regret for one minute the very public way in which I opposed the Vietnam War. I still contend that it was one of the worst mistakes that the United States ever made. But the foolishness of President Johnson and his generals in no way takes away from the courage of the men who served in the rice paddies and the jungles and the skies of Southeast Asia.

Service. This weekend we honor our brave men and women who served in the military; especially those who laid down their lives on the battlefield. One can oppose a particular war, one can even be a pacifist and oppose *all* wars, while still admiring their courage and their willingness to serve. Jesus, after all, came into this world not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). And in today’s text, he is passing on to his disciples this call to service.

Let me set the scene for you. If we are to take John’s text at face value, Jesus is saying farewell to his disciples on Thursday night; the night before he was crucified. But John packs so much material into Thursday night – so much more than the other 3 gospels, so much that has nothing to do with the Seder meal that they were apparently sharing – that many scholars think that John has edited into the story some post-resurrection material that comes out of John’s mid-to-late 1st century church. There are many points in the 4th gospel where John – or whoever wrote this gospel – seems to have taken gems of wisdom from nearly a century of early Christian life and packed them into the storyline of Jesus’ ministry. And the author was justified in doing so because this wisdom had come to him and his church through the Spirit of Truth – that is, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Christ – whom Jesus had promised to send to them following his departure from this world. Jesus says of this Spirit, “He will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14). So if this Spirit is declaring the wisdom of Jesus to the early church, why not take what they’re hearing from the Spirit and write it back into the story of Jesus? It’s a clever literary device and a helpful teaching tool. So now – according to John’s story line – Jesus is leaving this world, but he’s charging his disciples to remain in the world and to serve in his name in the world. He says, “I am no longer in the world, but they [meaning, his disciples] are in the world” (John 17:11). And then, a few verses later, Jesus prays, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (Jn. 17:18).

The point seems to be this: we are saved *in* the world, not *from* the world. Jesus may be leaving this world, but he’s not taking his disciples with him; he’s not taking the Church with him. The Church is to remain in the world, serving as Jesus hands and feet; serving as his Body; serving this world which God so dearly loves.

The Church hasn’t always understood this. There have been times in Christian history when some factions of the Church have concluded that God hates the world, that God is just waiting to destroy the world; as foretold, they claim, in Revelation. And these folks have claimed that, just before that destruction comes, the true believers are going to be raptured out of the world and gathered up in the clouds with Jesus.

It’s a classic example of how folks can take bits and pieces of scripture, rip them out of context, and make them to say something that they never really said. The Rapture is not a piece of biblical doctrine, it’s a product of human imagination. The key verses that Rapture proponents point to are Matthew 24:40-41. Matthew has Jesus saying of the coming of the Son of Man: “Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.” But here Jesus is drawing an analogy with the story of Noah, when the bad folks were swept away by the flood waters, and the good folks were left. If you carry that analogy into Mathew 24:40-41, it’s the bad person who is taken, and the good person who is left. Far from being raptured *out* of the world, the good folks – the followers of Jesus – are left behind to serve God *in* the world. Now we could go on to talk about the judgmental words that an angry Matthew apparently puts into Jesus’ mouth, but that’s not the point here. The point is that whatever the 24th chapter of Matthew might be about, it’s *not* about good people being somehow beamed out of an evil world. The world is not inherently evil, it’s essentially good because God made it. God *loves* the world. God sent Jesus to *redeem* the world. Jesus commissioned the Church to serve *in* the world. The mission of the Church is not to wait around until the Rapture comes, but to engage the world in a life of service. As we say in our Disciples Affirmation of Faith, “We accept our mission of witness and service to all people.” That would be all of God’s children, all around the world, which God so dearly loves.

We are saved in the world, not from the world. We are saved by Jesus Christ – empowered by the grace of Jesus Christ – to serve the world; this world that belongs to God, this world that God blessed by becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

There are a variety of ways to serve. As Paul says, “There are varieties of services but the same Lord…[and] varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:4). We are called to serve according to the particular gifts that God has given to each and every one of us. You see, Christianity is not a spectator sport. Just as we’re not supposed to sit around and wait for the Rapture, we’re not supposed to sit around and watch others serve. *You* have been given a gift for service. *You* are called to serve. Your gift is reflected in what you enjoy doing; what you are passionate about. If you follow your passion, you’re likely to get a glimpse of where God is calling you to serve. Millard Fuller, a Disciple layman, was real good at making money, but he discovered that his *real* passion was building houses. And thus was born Habitat for Humanity. Each of us is called to serve. My mother was a school teacher for many years, but in retirement she discovered that her real passion was church administration. She spent her last 20 years – happy years – behind a desk in the church office. Each of us is called to serve. There were some women in one of my churches in Canada who were among the usual suspects that the Nominating Committee called each year to fill various vacancies. Some of them said “No” and felt guilty about it; others said, “Yes” and then resented the fact that they’d taken on a job that they didn’t really want to do. But their *passion* was working together in the kitchen. They were *glad* to do that! And especially when we had a funeral luncheon, I was so very grateful for their service. Each of us is called to serve. Whether it’s within the church walls or beyond the church walls, each of us is called to follow our passion and serve in this world that God so dearly loves.

By the way, when the Nominating Committee calls you, tell them what you’re passionate about and say, “Yes.” If it’s not what they ask you to do, then give them a counter-offer with something that you are passionate about and *want* to do.

We are in the world – God has *sent* us into the world – to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus.

One concluding thought: As a nation, we must learn once again to serve. I see service clubs like Lions and Rotary shrinking in size while the average age of club members continues to rise. We’re forgetting how to serve. I see mega-churches so happy to get together each week for worship, where they’re entertained by praise bands; but I see little evidence that the communities were those congregations are found are being transformed in the ways that you might expect if such a large number of Christians were being deployed for service. We’re forgetting how to serve. I see the near-worship of troops who appear on athletic fields; the great cheers that go up when we have a chance to show our appreciation for those in uniform. I sometimes wonder if the volume of cheers is fueled by relief that it’s *their* lives that are on the line, not mine; not those of my children or grandchildren. Relief; and maybe some guilt, because increasingly it’s a narrow segment of society that’s volunteering for the military: not the poorest kids, but certainly not the kids of the richest and most powerful either. Those who serve in the military tend to be working and middle-class kids from families with a history of military service. Only 20% of all elected officials have served. Less than 1% of their children have served. Less than 1% of Ivy League graduates have served. And too few people over-all are serving. The all-volunteer military keeps getting re-deployed and re-deployed because there aren’t enough young people coming into the service to provide for the common defense of the nation. We’re forgetting how to serve.

I think this nation, under God, requires once again a mandatory period of national service. I’d even call it the draft. Maybe every young person between the ages of 18 and 24 should be required to put in 2 years of service. But they’d be given some options. The military would be one option, of course, but doing work in the inner-city, or the national parks, or serving in something like the Peace Corps oversees, would also be among the options. 2 years of mandatory service. In return, the federal government would pay for up to 2 years of post-secondary education. It would teach our nation once again how to serve, and it would be a huge boost for the nation’s economy. Whenever we’ve invested heavily in education, there’s been a resulting increase in good-paying, skilled jobs.

The entire world, which God so dearly loves, is a wondrous gift from the Creator. This is the world in which we live; the world in which we’re called to serve. *God* calls us to serve. The Church is saved in the world, not from the world. As the Risen Christ prepares to leave the disciples, the power of the Holy Spirit is given to the Church, so that the Church might continue the work of Jesus; might be the hands and feet of Jesus; might go into all the world, baptizing in the name of Jesus and sharing the good news of God’s love and justice. Service, you see, is not a "spectator sport." It is what we have been created to do. Amen.