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[All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.]

John 17:13-20

An Old Prayer for a New Year

Greetings! The Lord be with you. This message is for Sunday, January 3, 2021. The Scripture reading for today comes from the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to John, chapter 17, verses 13-20.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to John devotes five chapters to the last evening of Jesus' life, from supper time up to the moment of his arrest. Chapter 13 describes Jesus' last evening meal with his disciples. Chapters 14-17 contain Jesus' farewell discourse, his last words to his disciples before his arrest. Jesus encouraged them and counseled them and taught them about the Holy Spirit. And Jesus prayed for them. The text for today is part of the prayer that John recorded in chapter 17.

In the reading for today, I invite you to notice especially three things. First, notice Jesus' words about identity. Second, notice Jesus' words about purpose. Third, notice words about challenge or difficulty. Three things: identity, purpose, challenge.

John 17:13-20...I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they may be truly sanctified. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.

Identity: Followers of Jesus are in the world but not of the world. We belong to Jesus, not to the world. Purpose: Followers of Jesus are sent into the world just as Jesus was sent into the world. Challenge: The world will react to us just as an organism reacts to a virus, like we don't belong, like we are invaders from another world...another reality...another truth.

Disciples of Jesus belong to Jesus, which necessarily means that we do not belong to the world. These are mutually exclusive. There is no dual citizenship. We may live in the world, but we belong to Jesus. Belonging to Jesus means that we do not belong to the world. Belonging to Jesus is not an add-on to our identity; it is the source of our identity. Belonging to Jesus is not a supplement to who we are in the world; it defines who we are in the world. When we belong to Jesus, absolutely everything about who we are--every moment of every day in every situation and every interaction--comes under the claim of Jesus. When we belong to Jesus, the world loses absolutely every claim to us--every moment of every day in every situation and every interaction.

Belonging to Jesus is not about adding some religious activities to our schedule or developing the spiritual component of our life. We no more belong to the world that Jesus belongs to the world. Just as Jesus is set apart for a special purpose (a holy

purpose), so are we set apart for a special, holy purpose. That is what 'sanctify' means...to set apart for a special (divine) purpose.

In his prayer, Jesus said that he sends his people into the world just as the Father sent him into the world. We are sent for a purpose. Jesus' words about that purpose are recorded throughout Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There is further commentary from Genesis to Revelation. Bear fruit. Love one another. Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded. Be salt and light. Put aside self-centered anger, self-centered desire, self-centered speaking, self-centered use of power, self-centered religiosity, self-centered worrying, and self-centered condemnation of others. Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus. Share the good news of the kingdom of God in word and in deed.

On the last evening of his life, Jesus did not review all the details of what it means to be sent by him into the world. He did sum it all up in chapter 13 when he washed his disciples' feet: serve one another as Jesus has served us; love one another and Jesus has loved us. In chapter 15, he developed an extended metaphor about grapevines and he used another phrase: bear fruit.

Around the table in chapter 13 or walking through a vineyard in chapter 15, again and again and again Jesus talked to his disciples about relationships. Following Jesus...belonging to Jesus...being sent by Jesus... It's all about relationships. Washing one another's feet is relational. Serving is relational. Loving is relational. Bearing fruit is relational.

When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he connected purpose to identity. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him." Later that night, Jesus prayed regarding his disciples, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them in to the world."

When Jesus introduced his metaphor about grapevines and branches, he connected purpose to identity. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." Branches can only bear fruit that is characteristic of the tree to which they belong. Branches that belong to an apple tree bear apples. Branches that belong to an orange tree bear oranges. Branches that belong to Jesus bear fruit that is characteristic of Jesus. Branches that belong to the world bear fruit that is characteristic of the world. Branches that are disconnected from the tree bear no fruit. We have absolutely no responsibility to re-create the life of Jesus in the world. We have every responsibility to be so connected to Jesus that his life flows out from himself, through us, into the world.

When Jesus said that the world will hate us just as the world hated him, he was not just talking about the real potential of persecution for the sake of the gospel. He was talking about persecution, but he was also talking about more. Jesus was talking about the resistance/obstacles/ conflicts/temptations/opposition (both from within our own hearts and from the world around us) that we will experience when we strive to live according to God's ways instead of the world's ways.

When we strive to put aside self-centered anger and instead bless those who curse us, there will be resistance from within and without. When we strive to re-direct our self-centered desires to God-centered desires, there will be obstacles from within and without. When we strive to refrain from self-centered speaking and instead speak with transparency and without deception or manipulation, there will be conflicts within and without. When we strive to abandon the power of self-serving coercion and put into practice the power of self-sacrificing love, we will face temptations from within and without. When we strive to let of self-centered religiosity, self-centered worrying, and self-centered condemnation of others, there will be opposition from within and without. When we strive to serve rather than be served and to love as we have been loved, the world that still dwells within us and the world in which we dwell will rebel, because when it comes right down to it, self-centeredness is the way the world understands, the way the world operates, the way the world accepts.

Identity. We are defined by our relationship to Jesus, just as Jesus is defined by his relationship to the Father. Purpose. We are sent to bear fruit born from our relationship to the Father, through the Son, guided by the Spirit. Challenge. Do not be surprised that it is not easy. You are set apart to be different. You are sent to make a difference. The world around you prefers the status quo. The world within you prefers the status quo.

People are dying in this world. Dying of disease, violence, and disaster. But also dying of desperation, disillusionment, and deception. People are dying of the status quo.

By the grace of God we have been given life. We belong to Jesus and his ways. We are sent into the world to make a difference by living his ways and demonstrating hope, courage, and truth.

2020 is finally over. 2021 is finally here. This year, by the grace of God and led by his Spirit, may we make a difference by living his ways and demonstrating hope, courage, and truth. And may the full measure of Christ's joy be within us. May the full measure of Christ's joy be within you. Amen.