

Sermon Text: John 17: 6-19

I'm trying to figure out why this side is mostly full, and this side is about half empty. I'm not sure. What happened to the people who usually sit over here? I guess it's Memorial Day Weekend. I sort of feel that weekend feel about worship today. I sort of hear your prayer between the lines, "Be brief!" I will, if you agree to listen.

A Sunday school teacher asked her eager ten-year-olds if they had a million dollars, would they give it to the missionaries that their church sponsored. They all screamed, "Why yes! We would!" What about a thousand dollars? They all screamed, "Yes!" What about a hundred dollars? In agreement, all the little ten-year-old boys said, "Yes!" "What if I asked you," the teacher said, "to give \$1.00 to these missionaries we support?" Nine of them said, "Yes!" Little Johnny was quiet, sort of fumbling in his pocket. The teacher said, "Johnny, now this time why didn't you say yes?" He said, "Well, because I, I have a dollar."

What we do in theory and what we do value in fact in our lives is the question. It's all through that convoluted prayer that you read, and should read again in the 17th chapter of John. What do we value in theory, and what do we value in fact in our lives? Are we in the world, but not of the world, or have we sold, and give lip service to God, and real service to the things of dust and rust and desire that are passing, that are worldly? As Christians, we promise our lives to God. How much of our lives? Have we become worldly – and what does that mean? Is worldly a good word or is it a bad word? Is it a compliment or is it an insult? It's changed over my lifetime. There was a day when you called somebody worldly, that was insulting because it meant they were tied to physical things. It was the opposite of spiritual. Worldly meant in the epicurean sense to eat and to drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. If it feels good, do it, for tomorrow we die. The epicureans were philosophers, a school of philosophy that actually existed in Jesus' time. They are mentioned in the Book of Acts. They thought that there is nothing else but this life and these bodies and these appetites so enjoy them because afterwards there is nothing. Worldly was an insult of a superficial life living without any acknowledgement of spiritual realities.

Now, if we call somebody worldly, it is come to mean sophisticated or well-traveled, or perhaps wealthy and knowledgeable about the very best that the world has to offer, but worldly even now carries the connotation of not really believing in religious faith of any kind. A worldly Christian or a nominal Christian or a casual Christian is a Christian in name, but in fact a citizen of the world, a citizen of the world in behavior and temperament and use of money and speech and every other way. A worldly Christian in times past was an insult, and it meant a person who owned a Bible and came to church, but distinguished himself or herself from the common culture in no particular way, was not different from anyone else who did not claim Christ.

"Harper's" magazine back awhile had a poll that found that 35% of people who identified themselves checked the box on the poll as "born-again Christians" had been divorced. That's 35% of those, and you know that's almost the same number of people who claim no

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faith at all. No difference from the surrounding culture. Another study found back in the 90's when there was a big movement for celibacy before marriage, 2.5 million young people pledged to wait until marriage. Only 12% kept that pledge. The culture is screaming eat and drink and be merry for tomorrow we die, and God says we were made for more than the body and undisciplined lust and things of dust. It looks sometimes like the world is winning.

Cynicism starts earlier and earlier each generation. I read a quote. A young boy aged 15 wrote this, now with dark sort of humor, he wrote, “If we could just get everyone to close their eyes and visualize world peace for an hour, imagine how serene and quiet it would be before the looting started.”

We have grace and love and forgiveness preached without any mention of discipline and growth and sanctification for many years, and it seems we have reduced Christian faith to giving God the nod and leaving it at that. I remember in the Gospel of Luke in the 13th chapter when someone asked Jesus, “Lord, are there only going to be a few people saved?” He said to them, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door because many, I tell you, will try to enter, and will not be able to.” I also recall the opening words from the Old Testament of that book of wisdom, Ecclesiastes, it's variously translated, “Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” A better translation of the Hebrew is emptiness, nothingness, all is emptiness. Strive all you want, eat all you want, drink all you want, fill your desires all you want says the Book of Ecclesiastes, and you will still find yourself empty.

The world cannot fill your spiritual hungers. Only God can quench that thirst for meaning. Now, running all these thoughts together, lets me ask you, knowing that our number one job description as Christians is to make disciples and knowing, as your pastor, that middle class Methodists mostly witness with their lives, what does your life witness to? Concerning the worth of God's teaching and the worth we place upon the things we desire in the world, we've got God's teaching here and we've got our desire for the things of the world here, what does our life and the way we live it actually witness? What kind of witness is it to say with our mouths that what the world offers is empty, but to live out our lives so that it appears that possessions and desires and the esteem of others matter more? What sort of witness is that?

Now, I'll tell you a true story, and I'll tell you that I have not achieved sanctification yet because I still think bad thoughts. My former house was almost 4,000 square feet. It had a Jacuzzi tub. It had a separated two-car garage with a workshop attached. The garage looked so nice that the Jehovah's Witnesses used to leave literature in the garage door thinking it was a separate house. It had a finished upstairs room where my friends and I used to lift weights. It had a sprinkler system in the lawn. We had a one-acre lawn with lawn service. I didn't have to worry about it. I felt decadent! For about a week, then I got used to it, and then I felt special and important to live there! One day, a man who was partially disabled, a man who had visited my church, and a man with whom I had eaten in his home, and my men's club and I went and built him a ramp at his trailer where he lived, this man got my address, and he came by my house. He looked at the house, and he said,

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“My Lord, four families could live here!” I got defensive, and I got kind of mad. I thought to myself, now, boy, I have helped you, how dare you, how dare you tell me the truth like that!

The Book of James says that friendship with the world is enmity against God. Now, I am not preaching some sort of Gnostic denial of the physical world. I am saying instead that your worth, your worth, is not tied up in your wealth or your status or your experiences or your desires. Your worth comes from the fact that God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His cross. God loved you. God loves you. You have done nothing to deserve love, could do nothing to deserve that love. It is entirely a gift from God. Rejoice in that! Boast of God’s love if you must boast, to paraphrase the Apostle Paul. Find your identity in God’s love, and treat others as those whom God loves. That’s the Christian faith. When it comes to the things of this world, hold those things very loosely. First of all, love God and love others. That defines a child of God. That should be your witness as a Christian.

1 John 4:16 says this, and this is worth remembering, 1 John 4:16, it says, “God is love and all who live in love, live in God. God loves them, and as we live in God, our love grows more perfect so we will not be afraid on the Day of Judgment, but we can face Him with confidence because we are like Christ here in this world.” Such love has no fear because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of judgment, and this shows that His love has not been perfected in us. We love each other as a result of His loving us first. If someone says I love God, but hates his brother or sister, that person is a liar. This is the Scripture. If a person says I love God, but hates his brother or sister, that person is a liar, for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God whom we have not seen? 1 John 4:16.

So we are not being Christian by renouncing the world and all its darkness and evil from this safe sanctuary. We are Christian by loving and cherishing the world, but holding those things loosely. This is the world God made. The world God is redeeming. We witness by being the church. Living and loving each other here in the church draws people to us. Yes, it is our witness. We are not to renounce the world. We are to live as an outpost of God’s Kingdom, a lighthouse of God’s love, holding loosely whatever we have, and revealing a higher allegiance than merely serving ourselves and our appetites. Finally, the Gospel warns us against putting our treasure in the wrong place. Jesus said to His disciples, “Fear not little flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.” He then warns them that their hearts will be where their treasure is, and the only safe place is the eternal vision of God.

Christians are not those who say, “This world is on fire so I’m going to stay safe in the church!” I think Christians are those who say, “This world is on fire. God help me, I’m going in! I’m going in to rescue as many as I can.”

You know, Jerusalem had the cult of the temple, and Jesus said, you know they sort of believed that the temple was where God lived, where he resided, and Jesus said, “This temple is going to come down.” It did. God was and still is mightily present and available in the world. God is not gone. God is here. We are to live as if we know that, and live so

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that we show that in our lives, in the world, not here, just here in this building. Even churches are kind of becoming worldly. Folks say, well making disciples, well that's sort of some committee's job or the staff's job or the minister's job, as for me, and I've kind of heard this, that church better meet my needs, or I'll take my church shopping on the road.

Let me dare make a marriage analogy. Caroline's out of town. She's way out of town. Let me dare make a marriage analogy. You know it is the bumping up against each other and still staying married that makes us understand how hard love and forgiveness are. Can I get an Amen on it? We also know by trying to practice love and forgiveness in that close and intimate relationship of marriage that we need God's help to be able to love and forgive that much. It's the same in church, in the pews, in the Sunday school classes, in the committees, in this community. We need God's help to be able to love and forgive that much and so be an effective witness as the church in the world.

An eight-year-old named Nan once wrote, “Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in my family, and I can never do it.” We need God's help to be the church and to be the witnesses we are called to be. If God is trustworthy, and I believe that, then the Kingdom of God is unstoppable no matter what appears to be happening in the world. The question of faith is not which church meets my needs at the moment. The question is am I living self-centered or God-centered? Am I living in the world or serving in God's coming kingdom? Are you part of getting for yourself religion or part of God's growing kingdom?

The Book of Revelations pictures the completion of the great commission. I know we don't spend much time in that book, but it pictures the completion. It is a beautiful portrait. It pictures an enormous crowd of people from every race and tribe and nation and every language standing before Jesus Christ to worship Him. If that is the end game, are we with the plan or are we off on some self-directed tour weaving from me and mine with an occasional nod toward God when we have nothing better to do? It's a fair question.

You know, we did send Caroline and Menke off yesterday and several others in this team to Nicaragua to work on the children's home. There are forces in that country, which work against any belief in God. There are still Marxist forces in that country that do not want the cause of Christ to grow and succeed. It threatens their power. They are diving into the deep end when they go there. Hands-on missions always witness better than words alone. Also, please continue to pray for the Salkehatchie camp. I do hope that my appeal to the state and to Atlanta office of UMVIM will bear fruit, and we will be able to fix the homes we have looked at. It just reminds me that God is not so local. God is global. God so loved the world, and from the beginning God wanted family members from every nation. The Bible says from one person, God made all nations who live on earth, and He decided when and where every nation would be, and God has done all this so that we will look for Him, and reach out and find Him.

As I close, let me redefine just a little bit the term “worldly Christian” not as an insult of superficiality, but as one who actually lives out his or her faith boldly in the world. Perhaps we could redefine worldly Christian as one who offers Christ in the world to the

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outcasts, to the forgotten, to the sinners, to the petty, to the holders of grudges, to the haughty with power, and to the poor who have nowhere to turn, but God and God's peoples. We can find our worth in God, and find our purpose out there in the world, sharing God's love with others. Your perspective and knowledge of your needs does determine what you value. I hope that you know that you need a Savior, you have one in Jesus Christ, and you value that love so much that you'll want to share it, but perspective is an amazing thing.

A miner was trapped underground. He was looking for gold in the beginning, but he became trapped underground, and he was almost freezing to death, but he kept digging in the frozen earth for gold. He thought, someone will find me, and I want to find the gold. Finally, he was there, and his supplies were running out, and the earth was thawed in the spring, and he was down to his last ration of food. He broke through some hard crust in the ground, and he hit something with his shovel. He hit a box. Inside of the box, as he opened, he found it was a carton of canned food some other miner had left years ago. He thought, boy, am I lucky, that could have been gold. I liked it. I liked it.

Christians know what we need and what lasts. It's the folks who find their worth only in the things of this world who are to be pitied most. Jesus said, “You people who get so wrapped up in your desires and the praise of others that you scratch and you bite and you work yourselves silly to get your desires met, if that is what you want, and that is what you get, then that is all that you get.” That's it. If that is what you want, then you have written God's will and compassion for others completely out of your life. If you want stuff and the praise of others, you can get that, but Jesus says there is more than that to life.

There is a story about a very wealthy woman, who lived in a palatial home surrounded by fine tapestries and linens and imported china, and she indulged in every luxury. She died, and she went off to the gates of Heaven. Now, this is a story. This is not theology. It's a Protestant story because there's an angel at the gate. If it's a Catholic story, it's St. Peter at the gate. You know the difference. The angel there was to accompany her to her eternal home, and they passed a lot of fine homes, magnificent large homes with grandeur and decorations, and finally they come down a very plain-looking street. Down at the end, there was a very humble little cottage. They turned to enter, and the woman stopped and she looked with tragic disappointment on her face, and the angel said to her, “This is to be your eternal home.” She said, “Oh no, but I've been accustomed to only the finest and the best. There were many, many other beautiful homes that we passed similar to mine on earth. There must be some mistake.” “Ah,” said the angel, “We had to build your eternal home here out of the material which you sent us from earth, and this is the best we could do.”

Jesus told us to store up your treasures in Heaven, to use your worldly resources, your time, your talent, your treasures, to use your worldly resources as tools for kingdom-building, not toys for self-indulgence. To use your time and your talent and your treasure as tools for kingdom-building, not toys for self-indulgence. This is what it means to be in the world, but not of the world. Amen.