

## “The World – Our Monastery”

John 17:6-19

What would it be like, I sometimes wonder, to be a monk? To live in some mountain or desert monastery far from the hustle and bustle, far from news, property taxes, traffic, far from just about everything. To awaken, probably way too early (not to mention alone) in a sparsely furnished monastic cell rather than a comfortable bedroom. To begin the day with prescribed prayers rather than a hot shower and coffee. To share a silent breakfast with other monastics, rather than one filled with conversation, the newspaper and the Today Show. To already be everywhere you are going to be that day.

There is a side of me I have to admit, the introvertive side, to which at times this all sounds somewhat appealing. The solitude and simplicity, the quiet, the less hectic pace – at times it sounds appealing. But the truth is I don't think it's for me. As much as I may need time to myself, I also need social interaction. And as far as I can tell, I have not been called to that kind of life.

Rather, it seems to me, I have been called to live out my faith in the world, to follow Christ while interacting with others, while paying bills, mowing lawns, checking the answering machine, working of my tennis serve, and trying to manage an overloaded email account,

This is not to disparage those who do feel called to the simplicity and devotion of a life of separation and asceticism. Some of those have contributed a great deal to religion and to the world. St. Francis and St. Benedict, to name a few, have inspired millions of Christians. The Rule of St. Benedict with its emphasis upon hospitality and upon treating the stranger as if he or she were Christ himself, is inspiring and practical.

One of the key Biblical passages cited by those in monastic orders as well as by groups such as the Amish, is 1 John 2:15-17: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever.”

Monasticism was not an option in the Presbyterian church in which I grew up. Still there was a certain amount of encouragement in that direction. The words of a chorus we sang at church camp and at youth group meetings are still there, imprinted in my mind:

*This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through;  
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.  
The angels beckon me to heaven's open door,  
and I can't feel at home in this world anymore.*

Just passing through. Not really at home in the world.

There is, after all, a certain amount of other-worldliness about the Christian faith. Karl Marx was not entirely wrong with his well-known charge that “religion is the opiate of the people,” that, in other words, it keeps people from becoming too discontented with their lot in life by promising them something better in the next life. If their resources here are meager, at least they can take comfort in the dream of “treasures laid up somewhere beyond the blue.”

But ultimately, I would have to contend, our faith is not other-worldly, but rather firmly rooted in the world. The Christian Gospel is an incarnate Gospel, God coming to us in Jesus Christ, a human being living in the world. In John's Gospel we read that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....” Literally, he “pitched his tent among us.” He lived in the world, among people.

If some expressions of Christianity tend toward otherworldliness, emphasizing heaven and ignoring problems here on earth, others, and I think our denomination is one, shows concern for the living conditions of all of God's creatures here on earth.

Our Gospel reading today is a prayer that Jesus offers on behalf of his disciples:

"...I am no longer in the world, but they are in 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....As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

Jesus may have ascended to heaven, as we say in the Apostles' Creed (and by the way Ascension Day was last Thursday), but he left all of us behind to live in the real world. We are the new incarnation of God in the world. We are the ones who must provide God's presence, a redemptive presence in the world.

Teresa of Avila said "Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out on a hurting world, yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good; yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

It was Martin Luther who said "the world in my monastery." I like that.

For many of us, whatever meditation we do is likely to be done on the run, brief interludes sandwiched between activities, short moments of awareness, rather than a prescribed, disciplined devotion. "Prayer on location," as one person describes it.

Part of the appeal of monasticism may be the desire to get away from the world in which we live. And that is understandable. Who among us hasn't at times wished that we could stop the world and get off, as the song says, or be lifted up into the sky like as Jesus was in the Ascension, or transported on a flaming chariot like Elijah? It's a very human sentiment.

In one of the Psalms the writer says:

*O that I had wings like a dove!  
I would fly away and be at rest;  
truly, I would flee far away;  
I would lodge in the wilderness;  
I would hurry to find a shelter for myself  
from the raging wind and tempest.*

Even Robert Frost in one of his poems says:

"I'd like to get away from earth awhile  
and then come back to it and begin over." ("Birches")

The novel *The Friendly Persuasion*, by Jessamyn West, is about a Quaker nurseryman named Jess Birdwell and his family living in Indiana in the late 1800's. In one episode, Jess hears his daughter singing as she dusts the house in preparation for a gathering they are having that evening. She sings:

"I am a stranger here, within a foreign land.  
My home is far away, upon a coral strand."

And Jess thinks to himself, as he hears her sing this song:

"She believes it....Life's a shock to the young. It's a shock to have an old man for a father instead of an angel. It's a shock to eat ham gravy instead of honey dewdrops. And to like ham gravy! That's the worst shock of all. (To) find yourself fitting into this sorry world."

For most all of us there are times when we are tired of fitting into this sorry world and the idea of being whisked away to a better world sounds pretty appealing. But the truth is, we don't really have that option.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, in one of his sermons, tells of a cartoon picturing a woman on shipboard saying to a companion, "I took this trip just to get away from myself." As Fosdick says, it takes more than a sea trip to do that.

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The truth is that the world, the earth, is the locale of our lives. If the ascension tells us that the place for Jesus is now somewhere else, it also tells us that the place for us is here.

Later in that poem by Robert Frost he says as much:

"I'd like to get away from earth awhile  
and then come back to it and begin over....  
Let no fate willfully misunderstand me  
and half grant what I wish and snatch me away  
not to return. Earth's the right place for love;  
I don't know where it's likely to go better."

Jesus may be on the right hand of the Father, but we are here on terra firma. We have our feet solidly planted in the world. This is the place where we must live out our Christian faith. This is where we have to make it happen. If the challenge for the monk is to find God in solitude and in disciplined spiritual practices, the challenge for us is to find God in the experiences of our lives, while raising families, doing the wash, attending meetings, going to work. To experience God in the midst of busy schedules, leaky pipes, crying children, aging parents, the death of loved ones.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in one of his books talks about the tendency people have to divide life into categories, calling some things holy and other things profane or ordinary. He points out, however, that the word "profane" literally means "in front of the temple." One of the fundamental teachings of Judaism, he says, is that the search for holiness, for the encounter with God, is not confined to the synagogue. I think the same thing is true in Christianity.

On Thursday evening Rick Ufford Chase spoke in the second gathering of our lecture series, and he had a lot to say. He spoke about the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and how they recruit and train people to go to Columbia in Central America for a month at a time to stand with people who lives are in jeopardy. As I have thought about what he said, it occurs to me that very few of us would feel called to put ourselves on the line in that way. But all of us have other opportunities. We can stand beside those who are in trouble, those who are grieving, those who feel totally alone. We can provide a redemptive presence among our circles of friends, coworkers, and associates, to be one of Christ's people in the world.

We can be peacemakers, we can be merciful, we can live in such a way as to not return evil for evil, to pray for anyone who may mistreat us in some way, to bless those who curse us. We have the unique opportunity to try these Christian practices not in a cloistered setting far from it all, but in the every day world in which you and I live. The question is, can we provide a redemptive presence in our world?