

It's Us Against the World?
1 Jn 5:4-6, John 17:6-19

We are already getting to that time when there is a lot of hating going on. Campaign season is revving up. It's not that people "go negative." It's that they spend all their time trying to get us to be afraid of how bad everyone else is so we won't ask any questions about them or what they think or where they stand - or most important, what they have done and who they really obey.

We all know it comes down to who they are going to obey. One of my former teachers has been in the US Congress a while. He said a long time ago, "You get to vote the way you want until 'they' call. If you don't obey them, you don't get to run again. I'm lucky to be in one of the few districts where the voters are more powerful than the callers." That was twenty years ago, and we all know how the world of politics works. We try to forget that they don't answer to us. Their "world" is run by other powers.

Jesus spent some time up against that "world" of powers. He says that we "do not belong to the world" and because of that, "the world hates us." So he says that he is sending the followers into the world the same way he has been in the world, and he thinks we are at risk of getting the same treatment he got. So Jesus prayed to God that the followers will be protected from the world after he has left it.

The world is against us, and we are in for it. God help us!

At least that is the way it looks these days. We Christians seem to be losing on most fronts. In our own country, in the last 10 years something has happened for the first time. Every denomination has lost ground to the population growth. Even so-called conservative "stronghold denominations" are losing their grip. Catholics, Baptist, even non-denominational churches are getting smaller.

We Presbyterians have listened to the press and accepted the explanations of the world for our losing ground. For years some of us have complained that we are too liberal and losing members, but own research is telling us that political stances and worship styles have little or nothing to do with the loss of membership in all denominations. In the last 30 years Presbyterians have lost more people who say they are "not conservative" than people who say they are. We have lost a lot of people in the middle. The difference used to be that the conservatives went and joined another church where we would know they quit. The others just quit going. We were their last stop, their last hope for a church that was different. When they quit us, they gave up on church.

There are other reasons: the population shift. We have lots of small churches in county seat towns. Young people didn't go back to small towns where small Presbyterian churches are. The towns have lost educated professionals, and so have we. The biggest cause is the generational

decline. The young adults who used to leave church and come back when their children were born have quit coming back. A lot of us who have grandchildren know about that.

What do the old quitters and the new never-joiners have in common? They all say that the church does not look any different, that going to church does not seem to matter. They are still “spiritual,” but they don’t have to be “religious.” The church is “out of touch” with their lives. They have found other options.

Now we can get all defensive and think the world is against us. We can try to “defend the faith” against the attacks from the world. After all, Jesus said they would hate us, so it only proves we are doing something right. We just need to keep on keeping on, because God will protect us, take care of us, and like the old hymn says, “we cannot fail.” We are predestined anyway and there is nothing we can do about it. God will make up for what we don’t do.

Now churches are beginning to wonder how that is working out. Northwood is really ahead of the curve. We have been through the valley of numbers decline, and we can see that if we look to the future and move toward it, we will be helping God be the church that people will come to instead of stay home from. Your church survey’s last fall said that we needed to move beyond who we have been to become who we can be. Last week, I heard lots of comments by congregation members that our vote for Rev. Traci Marie Smith was a signal of our embrace of a new future.

One thing is sure, and we best not forget it: Our future is more dependent upon our faithfulness to Christ to serve by his leading than by any love or hate the world may give us.

What does John mean when he says “the world”? He means the “evil” people. But John does not mean the people who don’t like us or ignore us or have quit church to be “spiritual” without being “religious.” Who does John mean? He says, “... the ones who belong to the world” as opposed to “the ones who belong to Christ.” So, the real question is “Who belongs to Christ?” What to people look like who belong to Christ? How do we know we are sheep instead of goats when Jesus is doing the separating?

For John, it is as clear in that upper room as good and evil. For John, evil is Judas - the guy who really thought he was doing the right thing to force Jesus’ hand as Miracle Messiah, or to look out for himself with the cause crumbling. For John, Judas is not the only evil one. When the truth was told in that room, they all had deserted him. Even John himself admitted in his own writing that he had watched from a distance. None of them had “stepped up.”

For John, there is only one line in the dirt between good and evil - between the ones who are in the world and the ones who are in Christ. For John, the constant focus is on the ones who are obedient to Christ and the ones who aren’t. Grace does the saving, but obedience is the evidence of the new life.

In that room between Resurrection and Pentecost, Jesus is praying that God will protect and guide the ones who are obedient. John does not mean the ones who are perfect. No one in the room was perfect, but they were still trying to be obedient, learning from their mistakes and God's forgiving. John means anyone who is trying belongs to Christ, ...the ones who are still in the room, and the ones out there in our world trying to do the kinds of things Jesus did and is still doing.

How does John get past worries and fears and judgments about the ones who are against us? He is more focused on who we are FOR - If we belong to Christ and not the world, then we are for the ones Jesus was for, and he surprised a lot of people by being for them. The real test is that we are supposed to be for the ones who are against us. John remembers Jesus saying, "God so loved the world, ..." God love the evil ones who hated God so much that God gave his Son to save them. God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn it. Instead Christ has done what he had to do to save it.

We belong to Christ when we do whatever we have to do for them - all the ones Jesus refused to condemn. We are here for the ones who are not here! We are called to be obedient to Christ and love the ones who are against us. Whoever may think badly of us, or speak critically of us, or just ignore us - we are FOR them! We do what Jesus did - we love them.

It's NOT us against the world. It's God and us FOR everyone! And since we are here for the ones who are not here, we must obey and do what Jesus did. Go out there and find them, and love them. Show them God's love in our love - the love the world can never show them.

What does that look like?

First, we remember that God knows more than we do about people's lives, troubles, heartaches, imperfections. God even knows more about our own hearts than we do. And the Bible asks, "Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and he is the one who died for sinners and intercedes with God for sinners."

We don't condemn anyone, judge anyone. God isn't. Why would we? We hunt for the people who feel the worst of condemnation, and we let them off the hook and tell them that there is a different world they can live in. We just need to cut people some slack - I'm always suspicious of the "Love the sinner, hate the sin" folk. They seem to forget about hating their own sins more. We are all in the same boat, and we all need a Savior to say "Peace, be still."

Second, we focus more on our own faithfulness and obedience than evaluating someone else's good or evil. Judgmentalism is the tendency to hold others to a higher standard than we apply to ourselves. Flip that coin over. Let's forgive others their sins more easily than we forgive ourselves. We may realize that God forgives us more easily than we forgive yourself. The point is not your sinning, because God is way past the condemning. The truth is you have God's help to be more than you think you can be.

We live a way that the world doesn't know. "They" are always trying to judge people. In Christ, we are past condemnation. Christ's gift was to put us past the paying for sins, and give us

power to live the gift of his grace for others. We are into loving and saving! We tell people, we show people that following Christ really does protect us from other people's judgment, and from our own. "God is past judging me. Why would I judge anyone?"

Finally, we simply focus on doing good for everyone, because everyone is loved by God. We are not supposed to let anything get in the way of loving the people God loves.

Northwood has lived in the "slide of the church" against the modern world for a while. All the explanations for decline answer a lot of questions, except for one: In the middle of all this decline of church in our country, there are a number of churches that are growing consistently in depth and in numbers. Across the spectrum from Catholic to Mainline to Community and non-denominational, they all have one common thread: *they all talk together, study together, work together, live together asking how they can make their own lives look more like Christ is living in their world today.* They focus on obedience, they don't worry about who is against them. They know that God is for them, and they belong to God. In fact, they celebrate the reality that the whole world and everyone already belong to God.

We do a lot of that around here at Northwood, and we trust God enough to let everyone who is asking the question honestly find the answer for themselves with the help of worship and study and making some part of Christ's life their pattern and project. We have no reason to listen to the fear tactics of others and the judgmentalism of the world. We are with the one who conquered all of that, and is leading us past it.

We are starting a new chapter in our future (not a chapter in our history), and the only line in the dirt is the one that Jesus drew: to love others the way he loves us, and to follow where he leads. We are "of Christ" living in the world the way he always has. We are the ones who do what we have to do to save whoever we can, help whoever we can, love whoever we can.