

May 17, 2015

John 17:11-20: ***“That Your Joy May Be Full”***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It says in our Gospel lesson for this morning: "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world." For some time now, Bible believing Christians in America have assumed that they are safe from persecution. They have generally thought to themselves, "It isn't happening here. That's what happens in other places, in other countries!" The truth is that for many years now there has been a slow but steady attack on the history and teachings of the Bible and the results are beginning to show. In a recent article (2015) from the Pew Research Center titled *America's Changing Religious Landscape* we read:

that the percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% in an equally massive Pew Research survey in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014. Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated – describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" – has jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%.

Now please keep in mind that the poll never defines a Christian but rather counts those who identify themselves as Christian. I personally believe that the devastation is much greater than this when you begin to dive into what people really believe. For example, back in 2013 another Pew Research Center poll demonstrated that 71% of all Christians believe that there are many religions that lead to eternal life. That is shocking since Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6)."

Commenting on the most recent Pew Research Center poll titled *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Bill O'Reilly correctly opined this last Tuesday in his "Talking Points" (May 12, 2015):

There is no question that people of faith are being marginalized by a secular media and pernicious entertainment . . . Truth is if you are a person of faith the media generally thinks you are a loon. The prevailing wisdom especially among young Americans is whatever is good for me is good, period . . . Any student of history knows that when a nation turns inward toward the pursuit of individual gratification, the country is in trouble.

Now that Christianity has been seriously weakened and is on a rapid decline in America, you have no doubt noticed that Christians are being stereotyped and demonized which in turn justifies a fierce hatred of them. Laws are now being slowly set in place to eventually criminalize Christians and their churches, businesses, and educational institutions. It is just a matter of time when Bible believing Christians will be left with some choices: 1) redefine what you believe; 2) deny what you believe; 3) hide what you believe; or 4) end up paying a heavy price for what you believe - and that can take many forms. Jesus says in our lesson, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one."

I think that since we are strangers down here and are looking forward to a heavenly kingdom, there is a part of us that would like to be taken out of this unbelieving world right now. But, our Savior doesn't

do that. We have work to do. We are to bear witness to him, and if that means dying with him then so be it. Of course that doesn't mean that it is our job punch the lions to get them to devour us. Instead, like Daniel, we continue to do what we must do as God requires. In this we remember today the words of Jesus' high priestly prayer: "While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them . . . But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves . . . Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."

There are a lot of interesting thoughts that flow from these words of Christ. When Jesus walked the earth, he kept his people in the name of the Father despite the hatred of this unbelieving world and the evil one. Since Jesus is the image or likeness of our heavenly Father, he is the revelation of the heart of the Father or the manifestation of his name. Today, this name (his person and work) comes to us in the truth of the Bible. The name is everything revealed about God; especially, "for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life." It is through the name of Jesus - truth - that the people of the past were guarded. In other words, in the face of the hatred of the unbelieving world and the evil one, the Christian today clings all the more to the one who overcame the unbelieving world and the evil one for us. We always take heart in the truth and keep our eyes on the destination. We cling tenaciously to the Bible, and by it we overcome no matter what happens in this lifetime.

Notice the other words of Jesus when he says, "I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves." Those are powerfully comforting words. They are words that are easily connected to these familiar words in the book of Hebrews:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Christ endured from sinners great hostility against him. What was it that kept him going? What was it that kept him on the cross? He considered the end of the matter. He kept focused on the fact that there would come a day when sin, death, this unbelieving world, and the devil would pass away. He thought about us being with him in glory. He considered our union with him and the everlasting joy that would be ours in his everlasting love and all of its endless possibility. And he is seated at the right hand of the throne of God which means that whatever he allows in our lives we can be rest assured that it is his great pity and kindness that will facilitate our reaching the goal - the salvation of our souls.

I certainly do not agree with everything he had to say, but Dwight L. Moody hit the nail on the head when he once wrote: "Happiness is caused by things that happen around me, and circumstances will mar it; but joy flows right on through trouble; joy flows on through the dark; joy flows in the night as well as in the day; joy flows all through persecution and opposition." Indeed, true happiness is caused by things

that happen around us. And what is the happiness that has happened around us? The Word became flesh, lived a perfect life for us, suffered and died on the cross for our sins, and rose from the dead that we might live. Shall we then be half-hearted Christians? Shall we lose heart in the face of all who hate us? How can we possibly grow weary and lose heart when we realize the infinite joy that is ours? Let us not be, as C. S. Lewis writes, “an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.”

Better still are the words of the apostle Paul when he writes: “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).”

No wonder that Jesus prays for his apostles and for us! No one knows the sin in this unbelieving world and its devastating effects more than he who made this world and watched us fall. No one knows the destructiveness and depths of sin more than he who took it all upon himself on the cross at Calvary. No one knows the sting of death more than he who was swallowed up by it so that he could swallow it up in his resurrection. No one knows more than Jesus the hurt and pain you feel because of sin and death, because of division and separation, because of isolation and loneliness. No one knows more than him. He endured it all **That Your Joy May Be Full!**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott