

This is the Sunday that comes *before* Pentecost, that celebration 50 days after Easter marking the gift of the Holy Spirit. It also comes *after* the Risen Jesus is no longer physically present with the disciples. Yet we affirm, as we sang last week, “Christ is alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine.”

Jesus of Nazareth is no longer physically present in our world as he was with the disciples, but yet Jesus remains active in our “*here and now.*” How is Jesus active? Well, listen to him praying for *us* in the Gospel lesson. “*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*” Jesus says that we are *set apart and sent for service.* As we strive to follow God’s commandment to love our neighbor, we are *Being In* the world, like Jesus was in the world, ---- but even more than that, we are now literally *Being Jesus* in the world, still active and enlivened by his Spirit. Through us, Jesus is no longer “*bound to distant years in Palestine.*”

How are the followers of Jesus supposed to “*be in the world?*” This is a *crucial* question. Jim Mayer, a wise seminary teacher who had been a missionary in Southeast Asia and India, used to teach about our mission as the Church in relating to the world. He said: “Some people think that the church is a quiet gathering of the faithful insiders, and the world is the wild party going on in a dangerously different room down the hall. In this view, the central purpose of the church is to isolate and protect the faithful insiders from the harm that might come if they got pulled into that wild party down the hall. Now, every once in a while, the people gathered quietly behind the walls of the “church” room send a scout, a brave soul, into the wild party, to raid it and maybe snatch out a few converts. These brave souls we call evangelists or missionaries.”

But Jim always reminded us that Jesus didn’t *hide out* and play it safe. He *hung out* with the vulnerable ones out at the margins. His life and teachings called any human claims to ultimate authority to account, not buying into worldly ways of violence— where “*might makes right.*” Jesus didn’t play it safe while sweating blood in the garden of Gethsemane; he didn’t walk away from the horror of the cross. Jesus came as a vulnerable infant into that world’s wild party, and there, right there in the midst of that messy reality, he lived and taught and healed and served. And Jesus still does not abandon our world.

As Jesus prays, he is preparing the disciples for his going away. In his prayer, Jesus pleads, “*Don’t take them out of the world.*” Jesus places us *in* the world to love and serve; we are *all* of us there at that same “wild party.” Jesus wants us to be where he chose to be. Out there, in a world of hurt, sent to serve as Jesus was sent.

Jesus insists that we “belong *in*” the world.” Yet, Jesus continues his prayer for us: “They do not belong *to* the world, just as I do not belong to the world.” We belong to Jesus; that means *the world doesn’t own us.* Jesus sends us out to be *IN* the world, not *OF* the world. Jesus wants to continue to be active in the world *through us.* Jesus prays that God would protect and guide us in this challenging mission, life “*in but not of*” the world.

What does it mean to be “*kept in God’s name?*” We are given God’s name in our baptism: “*child of God, marked with the cross of Christ forever.*” When our connection to Jesus Christ is the heart of *who we are and what we do*, God’s children can resist the siren song of success, as the world sees it, and securing material comforts. We don’t have to be bound to anxious self-promotion or fearful self-protection. We’re at *the same party* with those who are “of the world,” but we just *aren’t dancing to the same tune* there.

Being “*in but not of*” is a tricky and tough job. God knows that no one could really make it all alone in that wild party. There are as many *ways* as there are *days* to lose our focus on *who* we really are and *how* we are called to serve. So often we have difficulty working together as “Christ alive and active” in the world. So, Jesus prays for Oneness.

The people of God have work to do that cannot be done except by working together. One day a small boy was trying to lift a heavy stone, but he couldn’t budge it. His father stopped to watch. Finally, he asked his son, “*Are you using all your strength?*” “Yes, I am; I am using every last bit of energy and strength that I have.” The father turned to the tired and frustrated boy and said, “No, you are *not* using all of your strength; you haven’t asked *me* to help you.”

So, the boy asked the father to help, but still that stone could not be moved. So, the father asked his older son to help, but still, they couldn’t move it. Then a neighbor was asked to help, then another, and finally with each one working together, the stone was moved! *Unity allows us to accomplish things that would be impossible otherwise.*

Of course, not just any kind of unity will do. Unity like the Nazis had unity? The fascist symbol of unity was a bundle of twigs bound together, unmovable, unbreakable. That’s a kind of unity where anyone who thinks or acts in their own way is shamed and shut out or worse. It’s really tempting to seek unity in that way, especially if we are feeling anxious. We imagine it will protect us from the pain that comes as we wrestle with the day-to-day difficulties of being faithful to Jesus in the midst of the world’s dangerously wild party.

So, how about *these* images of unity instead? Hot coals on a Weber grill spend themselves in their mission, glowing together keeps them going, giving off heat so the food will cook and we can eat. Or consider the diamond. Freshly dug from the earth, a diamond isn’t much to look at. But, cut and polished with its many facets, it is dazzling. Each facet is part of the whole diamond, and each has its own unique role to play—part of the master cutter’s plan. Just as each of us can have a role to play in mission, together.

We cannot force God’s unity, or foster it by worrying or nagging. That’s the world’s brand of unity. The Holy Spirit gives our unity—and it comes completely from our connection together in Jesus Christ. So, we can trust God to be at work through changes and challenges. God promises to make Spirit-unity happen. If we focus on our own selves, if we turn away from the risk of putting love for each other and our neighbors into action, we do well to listen again for the music of God’s grace.

It is necessary to *trust* that God is cutting and polishing our many different facets into a brilliant jewel. You plant seeds but you don't dig them up every day to see if they have sprouted yet, right? A person needs to trust that the seed will grow in its own time. When we focus on *ourselves* instead of on God's task and resources, we can get very discouraged and impatient. But, focus on being and sharing Jesus in the world's wild party, each one faithfully contributing their gifts, and *God will be at work taking care of the rest*.

God's perfect love embraces the world's room, even as the "wild party" goes on, wildly. Yes, often it is not easy to see God at work in the messiness of life. Like when Christians wrestle together about difficult issues and challenging transitions, with genuine and deeply-felt differences of opinion. God is at work there, when they remember that together they are all together the Body of Christ--*each one* loved by God, *each one* worthy of respect, able to help the Body grow in its ability to live and share God's mission.

We are sent, as Jesus was sent, to enact God's love in the world. Be on the look-out for God's love and grace, trust it, abide in it, share it. Focus on seeing opportunities to love your neighbor as yourself. Along the way, you may discover how God's perfect love for us is casting out fear. God's perfect love strengthens us by showing and sharing Jesus. Invite others to turn their lives and their loyalties toward God's purposes. God's Spirit active among us allows us to trust that the seeds will grow. God's perfect love frees us to forgive one another and face an uncharted future with hope and joy. God's perfect love abides in us when we confess Jesus with our lives—belonging in the world that God loves, but never belonging to it. Never owned by it. We belong to Jesus. Thanks be to God.