

**Stepping Out of Our Compounds**  
**John 17:13-19**  
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This sermon has come about in one of my typical ways of creating a sermon: backwards. It didn't start with a lectionary text, but it started with a bit of a quotation, a phrase that I apparently have carried around with me for a long time and believed as if it were a direct quotation from sacred text. One night at Crossroads Presbyterian Student Fellowship, I said it out loud in a Bible Study, Christians are to be "in the world but not of the world". I said it with assurance, like everybody knows it, but a student stopped me in my tracks when she asked, "What does that mean?" In the next days and weeks, I sought to find out why I said that, and where it comes from and what it really means. Through a strangely difficult process, I was led to its origins in the Gospel of John. Perhaps the Holy Spirit was guiding me to question what I think I know, and have a deeper, more careful look at what the Word really is telling me. Bible study will do that to you!

The central question I have is this: what does it mean to be "in the world, but not of the world"? How and why do we do that? In this gospel passage, Jesus has been trying to prepare the disciples for his upcoming departure from them, through death. They have been following him for some time, watching his actions, listening to his sermons and teachings, serving the people beside him. They probably assumed that this was going to go on indefinitely. They probably had some idea of the danger they all faced from the opposition, and maybe even anticipated capture and possible execution, but now Jesus was telling them that he was leaving the world and going to the Father. The disciples understood that he came from God, and they were feeling some sorrow that he was leaving them. But they did not understand what was to come. Jesus' words at this time are a way of divine assurance for them. He is leaving them, here in this world, but he has a purpose in doing so. God's work in the world does not end as Jesus leaves this world.

Jesus then offers up a prayer to God, within the hearing of the disciples, which has become a model for pastoral prayer in the Church. It falls naturally into three parts: Jesus' prayer for himself, his prayer for his disciples, to be left in this world after his ascension, and then his prayer for the church universal, that it might fulfill its mission of leading the world to believe.

The Greek word, “cosmos” translated as “world” in this English text, is used 18 times in this prayer, and here is used to mean “a way of life”, or “humankind”. Although Jesus is preparing the disciples for the fact that he is no longer going to be in this world, that he’s returning to God, he is very much concerned about what will occur in this world, a way of life and a population largely hostile to the way of God, after he has gone on.

Jesus, referring to his disciples, prays to God:

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because *they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to 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.....*( but, a verse later) *As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*

The world is apparently the place these disciples came from, for God gave them to Jesus from that world. Because they have listened and received the words that God gave them through Jesus, and believed that Jesus came from God, they, too, belong to God’s world and are a part of the family that includes God’s Son, Jesus. The “world” doesn’t get this, and sees this as a threat to a carefully prescribed way of life. Jesus is realistic about this, but Jesus specifically does not ask God to take back his people, out of this hateful world, but to leave them right here! In fact, Jesus sends them right into this world, just as God sent him into it. Because they were sent out into the gritty, hateful, misguided cosmos, where all of us were subsequently born, to teach and proclaim a new and better world, we all are given a place in God’s family.

So, if we, as God’s people, are not really of this world, but yet find ourselves physically born into it and living in it every day, how do we do that? I think it has been tempting over the generations, for Christians to stop short on the verse proclaiming that the disciples, like Jesus, were not “of the world”. Some have read this to mean that we should keep ourselves separate and safely removed from it. As God’s “A-list” people we should hold ourselves to a higher standard than the rest. No wonder the world has hated us! Recently we have seen images in the media of how some folks take this to an extreme: The Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints have removed themselves to compounds, as completely separate from the world as they can get. Is this the answer, to remove ourselves to safe and separate compounds, away from a hateful world, where every activity is carefully screened and directed and limited by God’s carefully chosen leaders?

Most of us here shake our heads and roll our eyes at the thought, but aren't we all familiar with different kinds of compounds to which we belong? Our compounds keep us safe from the world, from the hard questions about life, from temptations, from shame and pain and hopefully, death. They keep us out of the real world. Didn't the human impulses that resulted in racism come from a desire to build safe compounds? Aren't middle-class suburbs compounds? Can our comfortable, exclusive churches become compounds? If we live in these places, we are rarely confronted with the real-world realities of hunger, poverty, violence as it is displayed each night on our television news. But if someone didn't step out of the compound now and then, would African-Americans still be slaves? Would American women be able to vote, or Presbyterian women be ordained elders and deacons in their churches? Would there ever have been a Protestant Reformation?

In my life, I have loved the safety and security and familiarity of my compounds, which remind me of how I am not really of this world. Because of the place and time of my birth, and the wealth and privilege and loving family I have been afforded, I can always retreat to the safety of a compound when I've stepped too far into the real world. And yet, the moments when I have felt closest to God, when I have most felt called by the Holy Spirit, and known the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are often outside of those safe and secure walls.

On the last day of a mission trip I participated in to Haiti, our group stepped out of the compound for the first time. Each day, we were driven into the area where we worked in guarded vehicles, warned not to interact with the people in the streets we passed through. We were whisked into an area surrounded by high mud brick walls topped with broken glass and barbed wire and a high metal gate closed behind us. We worked within a clinic, with the only flush toilet in miles, provided only for the use of our team. The sick people of the community were allowed to come into the compound early in the morning, and wait all day on long concrete benches in the sun for medical services. Many were turned away because they arrived too late for a place in line. Outside of the walls, gang violence ruled the streets where open sewers ran and only one well gave potable water for a few hours each day to the thousands who lived in tin and cardboard lean-tos. On the last day of our work, the ten of us were allowed to venture on foot beyond the metal gate, just once, for the first time in many similar mission trips. We stepped out into the street, holding the hands of our young Haitian interpreters. We stood out. We were clearly not "of that world". We were white, and clean, and healthy. Slowly, we ventured to smile. Most smiled in

return. We walked through indescribable degradation and despair. We visited a simple, clean, one-room dwelling built by a previous mission group and celebrated God's providence with the beaming owners. We listened to a group of church women sing a hymn we all knew, in a language we did not speak, and understood God's hope. For a moment, we were all together, in this world, and yet clearly, not of it.

We were not safe. Within days, American missionaries would be robbed nearby, the Haitian pastor's wife would be kidnapped, violence and political unrest would make it impossible for missionaries to travel to Haiti for a time. Jesus did not send us into the world expecting that we would be safe. In a book called "Jesus For President", by one of my favorite modern prophets, Shane Claiborne entitles one chapter, "A Security Plan That Will Never Win an Election". He says that if you want to see Jesus' election platform, the place to look is in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." He talks about living, and walking, where Jesus walked, in the world, out among the enemies, loving them, out among the ugly and the sick and the sinful, feeding them, caring for them, eating beside them, touching them. And in the process, sometimes actually dying to this life in order to live eternally in another. These teachings aren't election winners in this world. Following these teachings is "the way", it's the way to be in this world, but clearly not of it.

I've had some recent glimpses into "the way", to be in the world but not exactly "of it". I attended a Presbyterian conference this summer at Montreat called "Church Unbound", about this very thing. Our denomination is trying new ways of stepping out of our church compounds, along with Christians all over the world. I have never been with such a diverse group of Presbyterians, all colors, from 31 different states, all ages, differing political leanings, differing Biblical understandings, very different churches, but we all came together to "partner with God's spirit to become the church we are dreaming of". There I heard tales of people living with the poor, meeting them face-to-face, and serving them, not just with anonymous contributions of money. I heard about a massage therapist who gives her time each week to massage the tired feet of the prostitutes who walk her city's steets. I heard about high school kids who gave up their own Prom to hold a special Prom for the disabled in their community. I heard about Mexican and American Christians meeting at the border and worshipping, sharing communion by throwing it over the fence. I heard about a banner hanging on an abandoned Catholic church in Philadelphia where homeless people were illegally sleeping which read, "How Can We

Worship a Homeless Man on Sunday and Ignore One on Monday?” In the world, but clearly not of it....

Beware of the compounds! Sometimes we don't even know we are in one, it is so familiar! Live in this world as if you are sharing what you know from another world, God's world, where all are one in Christ. Live here, today, seeing what is around you, listening and responding to the need and the pain you will see, with grace, and other-worldly love. Disarm the world with kindness. Go, knowing that you have been sent, prepared to suffer and prepared to rejoice, knowing that you have the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the love of God, and the promise of life everlasting!