

Sunday, May 17, 2026

Sermon: "Still in the World"

John 17:1-11 NRSV

Where we're heading in today's message: Christ's kingdom work continues, but now it is up to us to do the heavy lifting.

In the tentative post-COVID world of mid-2021, major corporations began to strategize about how to get employees back to the office. It was a process that evolved over several years and is still going on today.

But in 2021–2022, the push to get staffers back in-house was hot and heavy. Elon Musk told employees to show up for a minimum of 40 hours a week, and if anyone was unhappy with this, they should look for employment elsewhere. Most were not happy. After 12 to 18 months of working remotely from home wearing nothing but fuzzy polka dot pajamas or business wear for the upper half of the torso (suitable for Zoom meetings) and shorts on the lower half, many workers resisted.

Like employees at Amazon, Google and other ginormous corporations, Apple staffers were affected as well. One day, they found a churlish memo in their email inboxes from Apple CEO Tim Cook notifying them of a new policy that required all staff to return to the office on Tuesdays and Thursdays, as well as a third day that would vary by team. "We are excited to move forward with the pilot and believe that this revised framework will enhance our ability to work flexibly, while preserving the in-person collaboration that is so essential to our culture," Cook said in the memo.

Ian Goodfellow, Apple's director of machine learning, was not amused. Two years after being poached from Google to rejuvenate Apple's virtual assistant, Siri, and other AI projects, he promptly resigned, saying in an internal memo that "I strongly believe that more flexibility would have been the best policy for my team."

In some ways, Goodfellow's decision became a small parable of our age. Millions had tasted the strange freedom of being "in the work but not of the office." We learned how to collaborate through glowing screens, to lead meetings in open-back, faux fur slippers, to influence outcomes from bedrooms, basements and balconies. The

pandemic taught us that presence can be real even when bodies are apart.

And that paradox - absent yet present, remote yet real - helps us listen anew to Jesus' words in John 17:11: "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world."

This is part of Jesus' prayer on the night before his death, often called his "high-priestly prayer." It's spoken at the Last Supper in the upper room and before Gethsemane - that is to say, between the table and cross, between the world Jesus loves and the glory to which he is about to return. Jesus is preparing his disciples for a new kind of presence. He'll be gone from their sight but not from their lives. The work will continue, but now they, not Jesus, are going to do the heavy lifting.

This naturally induces separation anxiety, attachment issues and more than a few serious questions. Thus, we have Jesus' response in John 17 - a response to allay the anxiety and to address their concerns. But it's important to note that this text is not a lecture but a prayer, and that distinction matters. Before Jesus sends them out into ministry, he intercedes on their behalf. His prayer reveals how those who follow him and believe in him can live faithfully in a world where Christ is unseen, where faith operates in what minister, scholar, theologian, author and poet Eugene Peterson once called "the colony of heaven in the country of death."

So, what does it mean to remain in the world, while at the same time being "not of the office"? Four observations might help to reveal the answer.

1. The Work Continues (vv. 1-5)

"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you" (v. 1). At the opening of the prayer, Jesus names what is about to happen as glory. Not escape, not tragedy - glory. In John's gospel, glory is not divine fireworks but divine love revealed at full throttle. In a sort of divine deception, as Gustaf Aulén would put it in his classic work *Christus Victor* published almost 100 years ago, the cross, which will look like defeat, is actually a stunning victory and has God chortling over the master stroke that became the radiant

disclosure of who Jesus was: a self-giving Savior with love for the world.

Jesus then says, “You have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him” (v. 2). The one who prays already reigns. And he defines eternal life not as endless duration but as relationship: “that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (v. 3).

The first truth of living “still in the world” is that the work continues because the relationship continues. The disciples will not be orphaned employees after the boss leaves the building; they will carry the same mission under the same authority.

When we’re about to lose sight of Jesus, when the headlines darken with false narratives built on questionable facts, when our personal road becomes steep, we best remember that the work of the kingdom is not ours to invent. It is his to continue.

2. The Gift of Belonging (vv. 6-8)

Jesus says, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me ... They were yours, and you gave them to me” (v. 6). Before they do anything, the disciples belong. They are gifts exchanged within the love of Father and Son. Their identity precedes their activity.

This is a vital correction in an anxious age. We often imagine faith as freelance work - each believer hustling for results, managing spiritual metrics. But Jesus speaks the opposite: “They were yours, and you gave them to me.” We belong, well before we perform.

This notion, among others, is what saved Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl when he was in the concentration camps during WWII. His work on “meaning” as the key to a purposeful life was already well under way, and his experience in the camps only reinforced his view that connection to others and community are crucial pathways to discovering and fulfilling one’s life purpose.

Let’s return to the issue of working remotely from home. Of the following demographic cohorts, which would you expect to most strongly resist being forced to return to the office?

Boomers

Generation X

Millennials Generation Z

If you thought Gen Z, you thought wrong. The data shows unequivocally that Millennials, Gen Xers and Boomers are most likely to prefer a fully remote setup, while Gen Z is the most likely generation to prefer a hybrid model combining in-office and remote work.

Why? The answers are rather primal. At the top is loneliness. Gen Z employees report the highest rates of loneliness compared to older generations, and remote work can exacerbate this. They grew up as digital natives amid periods of global instability, economic uncertainty and heightened social awareness. They are social creatures, and since they are young and still early in their careers, they often value in-office time for learning, on-the-job guidance and building professional relationships.

That said, Gen Zers are also great boundary setters. They strive for work-life balance. They log off at 5:00 p.m., not 5:01 p.m. They aren't going to check work email on the weekends. They see work as a means to an end rather than the central component of their identity. They are not "of the work," or "of the office." They are in the world and "of life."

Gen Zers like to belong, as we all do at some level. It's one of our basic needs, right there in the middle of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy. For the disciples, and all of us, belonging is the soil from which obedience grows. Because they belong, the disciples can receive what Jesus gives - the words of the Father, the truth of the mission and the call to believe. "The words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you" (v. 8).

Belonging is what allows us to live in the world without being of it. When you know to whom you belong, you no longer need to chase every identity the world offers. The disciples' security does not depend on popularity, productivity or performance, but on relationship: "They were yours, and you gave them to me" (v. 6). To be given to Christ is to have a center that the cultural hegemony cannot steal. We can engage in the world's work, enjoy its beauty

and grieve its pain without letting any of it define us. Belonging roots us in the heart of God - the very God who placed us in the world as living evidence of what it means to be loved, kept and sent.

3. Kept in the Name (vv. 9-11)

Here the prayer tightens into intercession: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (v. 11). The two great requests are protection and unity, and both are grounded in the "name." In Scripture, the "name" means the revealed character of God - truthful, steadfast, merciful and loving. To be kept in that name is to be held within God's own reliability.

Protection is big, isn't it? The data suggests that almost half of American households are in possession of a handgun. Insurance protects us from unforeseen misfortune. Millions of Americans get vaccinated during flu season. Millions of Americans fear - rightly or wrongly - that illegal immigrants who are in our world but not of it will take their jobs, deplete local resources or commit crimes.

It's wise to take prudent steps to stay out of harm's way, but there are no guarantees, are there?

When Jesus prays for our protection, he's not asking the Father to bubble-wrap our lives. He's referring to the importance of being protected by the truth when lies are so loud and ubiquitous, by courage when fear crowds in, and by endurance when faith feels thin.

And if Jesus was concerned about the proliferation of relative truths, meta-narratives and situational ethics in the first century, what would he have to say now in a postmodern world where your truth is not my truth, a world in which there are few capital T maxims to hang our hats on? Truth, like balls and strikes, often depends on who's calling the game. The ball may be down and away and in the dirt, but if Joe West says it's a strike, it's a strike. End of story. In baseball, truth is relative, and we know that "there's no crying in baseball."

But in life, there is crying for sure! So, Jesus prays for something deeper: not protection from the truth, but protection by the Truth. He has already promised the coming Advocate - the Spirit of truth - who will "guide you into all the truth" (16:13). That Spirit is the safeguard of

every believer, not by keeping us untouched by the world, but by keeping us faithful within it, anchoring us in reality when everything else wobbles.

Unity, likewise, is not sameness. It isn't uniformity of opinion or culture. It is the shared life of those kept in the same name. It is the miracle of people whose differences do not dissolve love. In an era of polarization, Jesus' prayer sounds radical: "That they may be one as we are one" (v. 11). The credibility of the gospel, he suggests, depends on this.

Unity, like protection, is a gift with a purpose. Unity is the shared life of those who are kept in the same name - the life of Father and Son extended into a community of forgiven people. It is the miracle of difference held together by love. In an age of polarization, when disagreement so easily hardens into contempt, Jesus' prayer sounds almost subversive. The credibility of the gospel, he suggests, depends on people who can share some love across their divides.

But unity doesn't begin with strategies or slogans. It begins with listening. Before Jesus sends his followers, he prays for them; before the church speaks to the world, it must hear the Word that forms it. Listening is the first act of faith. The church's first posture in a noisy, reactive world is attentiveness - ears open, heart steady, waiting for God's direction.

To be "kept in the name" means allowing God's character to shape the way we speak, post, decide and pray. Unity is born not of perfect agreement but of shared attention to the same voice. When we listen together to Christ, we find ourselves, despite everything, speaking the same language of grace.

4. The Paradox of Presence (v. 11)

When Apple first proposed that return to the office for three days a week, Tim Cook told employees that "for all that we've been able to achieve while many of us have been separated, the truth is that there has been something essential missing from this past year: each other. Video conference calling has narrowed the distance between us, to be sure, but there are things it simply cannot replicate." (Emphasis added.)

“I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world” (v. 11). Herein lies the paradox that defines our experience as Christians. Jesus’ bodily absence becomes the condition for his spiritual presence. His departure is not abandonment but expansion. The Father will send the Spirit, and through the Spirit, Christ will be present everywhere his disciples go.

The church, then, is called to a kind of holy hybrid life - present in the world, rooted in heaven. We inhabit classrooms and kitchens, clinics and council meetings, not as tourists or escape artists but as residents of another kingdom whose presence transforms the neighborhood.

In their book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon describe these people as “resident aliens” - people who live within the culture yet answer to a different Authority, people whose loyalties run deeper than nationality or ideology and whose lives point to another homeland.

This means that as resident aliens, we must wear the character of Christ in a public way that’s as obvious as the cassock of a priest. When we are generous in a stingy culture, truthful in a manipulative one, or reconciling in a divided one, then the world at least has a chance, even if it’s the slightest, to catch a glimpse of the unseen Christ.

Remember that pandemic image again. The disciples will soon have to do “kingdom work” without Jesus physically at their side. Their Zoom connection, so to speak, will be prayer - the line that keeps them in communion with the Father. The Spirit will be the bandwidth of that connection, translating divine power into daily faithfulness.

So, Jesus’ prayer redefines presence. He will be absent in body but present in word and Spirit; we will be present in body but dependent on him for life. In that mutual indwelling - he in us, we in him - the mission continues.

We, too, are a distributed network of believers - still in the world, sustained by trust in the One who prays for us.

Jesus’ prayer in John 17 is a kind of commissioning service. He doesn’t remove his friends from the world’s complexity; he sends

them into it with new resources, including the Holy Spirit. With the guidance of this “Advocate,” we will:

- experience trust that can withstand the dark, i.e. faith;
- be given words that still nourish, i.e. the Word;
- have a safety network even when scattered, i.e. we will belong;
- have courage that outlasts fear, i.e. protection;
- have love strong enough to hold us together in spite of differences, i.e. unity.

To be “still in the world” is to live as people who remember who they are and whose they are. We don’t carry God into our workplaces and neighborhoods as if God were absent; we discover that God is already there, waiting to be recognized.

Wherever you find yourself this week - in the lab or the classroom, the checkout line or the family kitchen - practice presence over performance. Listen more than you speak. Be attentive to the person in front of you. Offer attention as a gift of grace.

And when the noise of the world grows loud, echo Jesus’ prayer: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” That prayer is still being answered in every believer who stays faithfully in the world for the world’s sake.

Christ has not left the work; he has left it in good hands - yours, kept in his name, sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit.
Alleluia, Amen.