

(John 17:6-19 NRSV)

⁶ "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for 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; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

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It's Hard to Live in the World

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: John 17:6-19

The Gospel of John barely made it into the Bible. We think of the Bible as eternal scripture. It is a holy book, containing the sacred scriptures of our tradition.

And that, of course, is true. However, that should not obscure the story of how the books of the Bible got chosen. In the early times of the Christian church the New Testament documents were being written. Paul was writing his letters to churches around the Mediterranean Sea. Various communities of Christians were compiling Gospels. Everywhere there was exciting and creative energy as the early generations of Christians strove to relate what Jesus the Christ meant to them.

We know from early writings of the church fathers and from discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag-Hammadi library that there blossomed a huge corpus of writings. And, as you might expect, these writings spanned a very large spectrum of views about God, about Jesus, about the world.

And finally, the church, like God did at creation, the church sought to make order out of the chaos. There were just too many different and contradictory views about too many important things. Many arguments and controversies arose. Different communities held out for different views. To make what was a very complex and bitter process a little more understandable, let us say that the church decided it needed to sort things out. It needed to decide what was true and what was heresy. It needed to make a Bible that all could look to for some measure of authority and with some measure of certainty.

There were various proposals and factions. At one extreme were those who thought there should be one Gospel, one story of Jesus. Perhaps the most famous example of this was the second century harmony of the four Gospels, the *Diatessaron* written by Tatian. Tatian essentially combined the existing Gospel into one story, much the way we still do when we build the Christmas story with the shepherds and inn from Luke and the wise men and Herod from Matthew. Others argued that several different Gospels should be preserved, even if they, in fact, were inconsistent one from another. But even those who lobbied for multiple Gospels were only willing to go so far. And that's where the Gospel of John almost got left out.

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There was a movement in early Christianity called Gnosticism. Maybe you've heard of it. Again, making a complicated story simple, the Gnostics generally believed that this world, creation, was a divine mistake and hopelessly corrupt. The idea of a savior, then, was to liberate us from this corrupt world. As you can imagine, Gnosticism didn't square with the accepted Biblical creation story. In Genesis God creates the world day by day and pronounces each day of creation good, very good. For the Gnostics, this world was not good at all.

Now listen to John:

¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

In John neither Jesus nor the disciples belong to the world. You can see why the Gnostics loved the Gospel of John and others had trouble with it. And that's why the Gospel of John almost didn't make it into the Bible.

Now, that leaves us with an even more interesting question. If the Gospel of John almost didn't make it into the Bible, why did it get in? Why did those who decided what got into the Bible, who were aggressively hostile to the Gnostic Christians, why did they put the Gospel of John in the canon?

The answer is very simple, really. While the people who decided what got into the Bible celebrated the beauty and wonder of God's creation, they also knew that living in the world is fraught with pitfalls. Living in the world without a guide and anchor is dangerous. Living in the world, one encounters the temptations of Satan's whispered promises. Greed, fortune, fame, desire beckon one, each promising to be the end all and be all of human fulfillment. And each, in truth, seen as an end all and be all, will certainly spell the end of one's being.

But the wiles of the world are insistent and seductive. Think for just a moment about the advertising you have seen in the last week. How often was sexual enticement used to sell you anything from a car to a bar of soap? How often were you promised your life would be perfect, not to mention your body, if only you ate the right diet food, or wore the right brand of clothes, or drank the right beer. The world's enticements laugh at their critics; they are confident in their ability to tempt human beings with their wares. And it doesn't take much looking at the world we live in to realize that their confidence is well-placed. The folk who allowed the Gospel of John into the Bible knew that their fondness for God's creation needed to be tempered with some skepticism about what the world alone could deliver, and some warning about its false promises.

And, so, in passages such as we read this morning, we find Jesus in the Gospel of John praying to God that his followers be protected from the world's enticements, or at least protected from the idea that the world's enticements lead to the things that are most important and ultimate. Said positively, Jesus prayed that

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his followers be protected by the word, the truth of the Gospel, which places life's ultimate fulfillment in the holy and sacred, in God. For anchored in God, life's pleasures become just that, life's pleasures, not life's end all and be all.

It is rather remarkable this morning that we are celebrating the two sacraments of the church, and the reaffirmation of them in worship. Washed in the waters of baptism, we acknowledge and embrace the holy as life's ultimate beacon. In Communion, we remind ourselves over and over again that we get off course, that we need to reorient ourselves, and that we depend on God's grace, along with our own efforts, to walk beside us and lift the spiritual fog into which we fall. And at church membership and confirmation we reaffirm our baptismal orientation to the sacred and away from the false promises of the world, and we recommit ourselves to living well in the world.

God's holy creation is full of goodness, but it is quite likely to become hopelessly lost in the thickets and the underbrush unless God protects us and we live oriented to God's way. May our church always be an instrument of God's desire for us to live well in the world. Amen.