

In, from, and back into

Ottawa Mennonite Church
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Scripture: *John 17:9-16*



Last weekend, the long weekend, unofficially started the summer. This means BBQ's outside, gatherings with friends, trips to the cottage, and perhaps a long awaited vacation, or even an adventure and if you are at all like me, this is the weekend where you begin to imagine and dream up your summer vacation.

What is it about vacations that attract us? I imagine that are a number of things that make vacations attractive; time away from work, a break from the daily grind, or even the opportunity to enter into another world. Vacations are escapes for us. They allow us to escape the life that we have created and enter into another life, if only just for a little while. Vacations give us the opportunity to step back from our busy lives and look into it from an outside perspective. Vacations give us opportunities to step back and survey our lives. Vacations are escapes.

This need or desire for escape is incredibly tempting. "Travel agents, the tourist industry and real estate businesses know this."¹ Millions of dollars are spent on marketing and advertising to grow this feeling of longing for escape. The travel industry has grown out of society's collective desire for escape. Cottages up north, all inclusive island vacations, and luxury cruises are just some of the retreats offered. If finances are a problem, some people simply jump in their cars and just drive, going on a quest to "search for themselves." I know one fellow who started got in his car one day and began driving west; he kept going for a year until he found what it was that he was looking for. He needed to escape to find himself.

Indeed escape is an incredibly deep desire of our society. For those of us gathered here, we share these same yearnings. We share the same yearnings of our neighbours, and some ways we feel these yearnings even more. One commentator writes that "Religious faith may intensify the desire for escape from the world. Having glimpsed a vision of what is holy and good; the human spirit may hunger not for the promised splendour of luxury resorts, but for a community and a way of being that avoid the clamour and conflict of the world."²

¹ Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Preaching the Revised common lectionary. Year B, Volume 2, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Pg, 545.

² Ibid.

The more one wades into the pool of Christian faith, the more one realizes and understands how vast the Christian faith is; how deep some of the commitments are, how encompassing it can feel. For some of us the desire to enter deeper into the Christian faith might require the giving up things viewed as 'worldly'. It might demand that we let go of some of the things which we think are important so that we can embrace other things that are truly more important.

Christian history is filled with people who believed that the world was corrupt and the only way to faithfully serve God and Christ was to become separate from the world, effectively escaping the world for the sake of the Gospel. Some of these Christians retreated from the world and into desert caves, as a way to commune closer with God and Christ, to be freed of the world and allow them a fuller realization of a faithful and holy life. Our history names these people the "Desert Fathers." Others, like Simon the Stylite, chose to live on top of a pillars; meters above the ground, living only on a platform and the charity of others. It has been stated that, as he seemed to be unable to avoid escaping the world horizontally, he may have thought it an attempt to try to escape it vertically.³

In our passage this morning Jesus is praying for the Disciples, Jesus knows that his time with them is at an end, and that he won't be there to guide or accompany them on the long journey ahead. He also recognizes that their problems are just beginning and that they will be at odds with the world, *kosmos* in the Greek. Mentioned twelve times, Jesus identifies the tension that the disciples have with the world. In this prayer Jesus uses three different prepositions are used to describe the disciples and our relationship with the world, in, from and back into.

In the World

We are in the world, there is no questioning that. We live in homes, we drive cars, we shop at the local supermarkets, and we use the common currency. We subscribe to modern services such as water, electricity, and heat, we pay bills, we have bank accounts, listen to the radio, watch television and movies, and we read literature. Try as we might, we cannot escape that we are a part of this world, this society and this culture.

We walk the very fine line of being **in** this world while trying to not be of the world. This is an interesting tension that we have to wrestle with, and a tension that our Anabaptist forbearers also wrestled with. Often this led to their persecution. Jesus recognized in his prayer that we are left in the world after he leaves. In verse 11 Jesus prays:

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world

³ "Simeon Stylites." Wikipedia [encyclopedia online](Wikipedia.org, 2009); available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simeon_Stylites (accessed May 27, 2009).

Being in the world means that we interact with the world. To imagine that we can become entirely independent of the world is a delusion. We interact with both the culture and the planet in ways that we are aware of and more often than naught in ways that we are unaware of.

In 1996 author Jon Krakauer wrote the novel *Into the Wild*. It tells the true story of Chris McCandless, a young idealistic 24 year old, who set out for the adventure of a lifetime, to wander out into the Alaskan wilderness, survive living off the land, and walk back out. During this “Alaskan Odyssey” he would live with only what he could gather and hunt from the land, far away from any civilization, and keep a journal describing his physical and spiritual progress as he faced the forces of nature. He took nothing with him that he would consider worldly, save for a few bare survival elements and his camera. During his travel, McCandless found an old bus that had been transformed into a shelter. This bus soon became **his** shelter out in the Alaskan wilderness. He managed to survive in the wilderness for several months, but ultimately his experiment to escape the world was failure and his emaciated body was eventually found by trappers.

Living in solitude and without connection to the rest of the world is an idealized dream. The long arm of globalization reaches incredible distances. The result is that there are few places on this planet that our society and culture have not touched.

To live in the world is difficult, especially without the physical reminder of Jesus with us. Jesus recognized this, and prayed for our protection. He prayed that we might not be seduced into the ways of the world and that we remain faithful even as we are in the world, living on this planet.

From the World

In the next couple of verses Jesus shifts from speaking about “in the world” to “from the world.” Another commentator suggests that meaning of the word “world” shifts. Instead of meaning the world which we dwell on, they suggest that it shifts to meaning “the system of practices and standards associated with society.”⁴

The practices and standards which we adhere too as Anabaptist Christians are certainly different than standards and practices that surround us. Where, we, as a community of believers believe in mutual aid, helping each other through times of struggle and strife. Our

⁴ Brian Stoffregen, “John 17.6-19,” Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john17x6.htm> (accessed May 27, 2009).

culture believes strongly in individualism, where it is the needs and wants of the individual which dominate. We believe in non-violent solutions to conflict, and peacemaking, rather than the world's practices of solving conflict with violence and punitive measures. We believe in working towards the good of others, whereas the world believes in capitalism, where it is the worship of the almighty dollar which drives commerce.

As Anabaptists we understand the want to be from the world, to be outside of the world. We try to be careful of our involvement with government because of the tricky way it operates in the variety of broken and corrupted systems. We are selective with the way in which we spend our money, recognizing the various peripheral systems which are hidden from the non-discerning consumer's view. Our belief of non-violence and peacemaking sets us apart from much of the world in our approach to conflict resolution. Our model of conflict resolution comes from scripture, by first approaching the offender alone, then next by approaching the offender with a witness, and finally by approaching the offender with the community.

But even with these distinctive differences between the world and the Anabaptist approach to the world.

“Jesus does not ask God to remove us from society, e.g. seeking to form Christian utopias.” Instead, “we are separated from the ‘people of the world’ in terms of the source of our behaviours and self-identity, but we are not separated from the ‘people of the world’ in terms of physical proximity. We continue to live next door to them.”⁵ We are asked to live next door, demonstrating and living out an example of a different way to live.

Back into the World

Thus we are sent back into the world. We are sent by Christ back into the world, to be living examples of how to live differently. We are pulled from being in the world, we are made separate from the world by joining the Body of Christ, and then we are sent back into the world as followers of Christ.

By living out the story of Jesus, by living out the teachings of Jesus we live differently. We are called to be different. We aren't called to be like everyone else, we are called to be examples of a different way, and alternative way. In times of hopelessness, we live a life filled with hope. In times of violence, we offer a voice of peace. In times of busyness, we offer a story with a different pace. We live with different priorities in our life.

⁵ Ibid.

But no matter how fed up, how tired, and exhausted we become with the world, with its ceaseless violence and corruption, with our frustration and despair about not being able to make a difference, we must remain in this world, because this is where we are sent, we are sent into the world. Christ's life reminds us that his pattern of his own life was not to escape from the world, but to fully engage it, even with all of its distorted powers and pressures.⁶

As Christians though, this isn't a cake walk. Being a Christian today in an ever secular world is not what it used to be. While we are not always viewed as an enemy, we are sometimes looked at with suspicion, sometimes with annoyance, sometimes with an apathetic view. But this is still the world that we are sent into. Even though the world might look at us with these eyes, Jesus still sends back into the world.

On my last trip I kept a journal, looking back over some of the entries I noticed one paragraph that stood out to me. In that paragraph I had expressed a sense of freedom that I found while traveling. I believe this feeling of freedom manifested itself because I had left the world that I was accustomed to living in and entered into an entirely different world. In a way I had escaped the world I was used to. When I had escaped, I had left behind almost everything of the old world. I left behind all of my worries, all of my concerns, all of my burdens. I had flown to the other side of the planet to escape my life and for a time being enter into a different one. It was only temporary, it was only a trip and eventually I had to return. I was called back into my world, and back into my worries, concerns, and burdens.

Jesus calls us back. Jesus does not want us to escape this world; Jesus wants us sent back into our world. To live beside those who don't know Jesus' story, who don't know God, who don't know the Good News which we live with. With Christ's presence we are empowered to live faithfully in the world, not owned by it, fully engaged with the needs and wounds of those around us, energized by the truth of God's word, and strengthened by Jesus, sent into the world that we all might have a more abundant life here and now.

This prayer by Jesus is important for us who live precarious tension of being in, from and back into the world. This prayer from Jesus tells us that we are not alone in the struggles that we endure. God is with us, just as God was with Jesus during His ministry, This prayer is important for us because it reminds us that God will be with us as we continue to live this tension of being in, from and back into the world.

Amen⁷

⁶ *Feasting on the Word*, pp. 545.

⁷ Quotations of Scripture are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless otherwise noted.