

Living in the World, Belonging to God

John 17:11b, 14-18

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
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I've asked you before: To whom do we belong?

The answer, of course, is to God. We belong to God. It's a simple affirmation, but one worth making often. We belong to God.

This is what Jesus reminds us in John's Gospel. Here in chapter 17, Jesus is praying to God for his disciples. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. You can hear Jesus' earnest pleading. It's nice to believe that Jesus would pray for us so earnestly.

Jesus says that the disciples for whom he is concerned do not belong to the world, just like he, Jesus, doesn't belong to the world. But Jesus doesn't ask God that God remove them from the world. No, Jesus asks God to protect them in the world, for they were sent into the world for ministry. In other words, these disciples belong *in* the world, but they do not belong *to* the world.

Protect them, Holy God.

These are poignant words spoken by a man who would soon be crucified by the world.

Protect them, Holy God, so that they might be one as you and I are one. Make the disciples "one" body (one body that we now call "the church"), just as Jesus is one with God and with the Holy Spirit.

It's heady stuff.

We belong in the world. We have a calling here. We have work to do. But we do not belong to the world; we belong to God. We belong to God.

In our funeral liturgy, we often share the words that Paul wrote to the church at Rome: If we live, we live unto the Lord. If we die, we die unto the Lord. So, then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. It's important to be reminded of this wonderful truth when we've lost somebody we love. What we are actually saying is that we haven't actually lost our loved one. They belong to God in life and in death. And we belong to God. And we all belong, eternally, together. We call this the communion of saints, and what a holy communion it is. Our children sing, "He's got the whole world in His hands," and they are right.

Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. God hears and answers prayer. Because of God's grace, we are one in God. We belong to God.

But there is much that vies for our attention.

We belong to our Rotary club, our book club, our political party, and our neighborhood association. We share the DNA of biological mothers and fathers, and—for better or for worse—we belong to our family, our cousins, our adoptive families. We belong to racial and cultural groups. We belong to fan clubs, garden clubs, booster clubs, country clubs, museum associations, gangs, sororities, the VFW, the DAR, the PCUSA.

Our hearts are loyal to many things. Not only are our loyalties divided, but also our loyalties divide us. We are distracted by many things. Our attention is divided. We sometimes lose sight of what's important. We let go of each other's hands precisely when we should be holding on most tightly. But the sovereign God is not distracted, do not let go, and loves us no matter what.

God cares about us no matter how much we care or don't care for God. God has heard Jesus's prayer. We belong to God. And God is worthy of our praise.

AMEN.