

Weirdoes and Hermits

John 17:6-19

According to the Book of Order, one of the very few responsibilities that the pastor bears alone, not “along with the session” is “to pray with and for” people in the church. And pray we do. We pray for them in our studies, we pray with them in their homes, in nursing homes and hospitals. I don’t remember now how it happened, but sometime early on in my ministry as a hospital chaplain before I prayed I started asking the question: what would you like me to pray for? The answer would seem obvious, given the situation – I should pray for healing, right? But sometimes the answers I got surprised me. Pray for my family. Ask God to come for me soon. Pray for my nurse, she seems so sad today. The answers people gave me told me so much about them, what kind of people they were, and sometimes, what their greatest fear was.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” That’s a question I put out there when we train the new elders for their work. What’s the very worst thing that can happen to us, to this church? What is our greatest fear as leaders of this church? Losing members? People being unhappy or angry with a decision we make? The money drying up? Or what about this: failing to do what God is calling us to do, even if it does stir up some trouble?

Jesus didn’t ask his disciples what they wanted him to pray for. He knew. He’s just finished telling them that his enemies were on the way to arrest him and would be there any minute; by this time tomorrow he would be dead. He’s just told them that they could look forward to the same fate. They would be hated, they would be thrown out of their synagogues, jailed, beaten and executed. They will suffer just as much as he will.

What would they want him to pray for? That none of that would happen! If you asked them what they thought the worst thing that could possibly happen to them was, it was probably exactly what he just described: Prison. Torture. Death. Pain. I can’t think of too many things worse than that. Given the situation, it seems a pretty fair prayer request: Keep our feet out of the fire, God. Keep us alive. Just because this has to be Jesus’ fate, don’t make it ours, too. Let us go about our business in peace, worshipping together and spreading the gospel undisturbed.

But he didn’t ask them, and he didn’t pray for any of those things. He knew that the worst thing that could happen to them wasn’t pain, or to be hated. The worst thing that could happen to them wasn’t death. The worst thing that could happen is that they lose their distinctiveness; that they blend in so well with the scenery around them that no one even notices that they are there.

Now, you’re probably wondering, how could *that* possibly happen when there is a steeple on every corner? How could anyone fail to notice that we are here? Our presence could hardly be ignored, especially in a town like Johnson City.

And it’s true – our church buildings can hardly be ignored. But do you remember that little rhyme we learned as children – Here’s the church, here’s the steeple? What happens when you open the doors? What do you see? Disciples? A bunch of people who are a little out of synch with the world around them? A bit on the quirky side? Weirdoes?

You should. Living Jesus' way isn't easy. His teaching might have been simple – forgive, don't judge, turn the other cheek, feed the hungry; there wasn't anything particularly complex about his words. But living them is anything but easy. And if we live like that, then we ought to stick out like a sore thumb. You'd open the doors and see all the people voluntarily living simply so that they have more to give and share with others. You'd see people who forgive petty wrongs and outrageous insults to themselves with grace – as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “why are you in the courts embroiled in lawsuits? Why not be wronged? Your Lord certainly was.”

You would open the doors and see people of all walks of life eating and worshipping and playing side by side – white collar and blue collar, homeless, mentally ill, developmentally disabled, hip hop fans and eighteenth century poetry scholars, UT fans and Florida fans, worshipping in the same sanctuary – imagine that! You'd open the doors and see people who've somehow managed to get from their heads to their hearts the fact that God looks at them and their petty sins in just the same way that God looks at thieves and drug dealers. You'd see people who don't just clean out their closets once a year and get rid of clothes they don't want, but people who will actually give the coat off their back to someone who is cold. You would see people who really do look at the lilies of the field and trust that God will feed them and clothe them, too.

And hopefully, hopefully, you wouldn't have to go to one of those steepled buildings to see what disciples are like. You probably noticed that this text wasn't very easy to read, and that's because of the repetition of some words for emphasis – it's easy to get tangled up in them. And one of the things Jesus says repeatedly is that he *isn't* praying that God would take us out of the world. This is a church building, not a cloister. It's a place to meet, not a place to hide. We are a community, but not a community that has given up on the world. This isn't a place to hide out and be protected from all the bad in the world. It's not a place for people to wait for Jesus to come back and sort all this mess and rottenness out. Hopefully our weirdness, our radical-ness will make its way out into the public arena, because what Jesus taught wasn't simply personal piety. He taught us to love God, but also to love our neighbor; all of our neighbors.

And if we do it right, then charity isn't enough. Building a Habitat house and donating to Good Sam are good, but unless we also do something about the root causes of poverty, it isn't enough. We can talk about peacemaking and give money for peacemaking projects, but as long as we are silent about the injustice and violence that the powerful inflict on the weak, and yes, we are the powerful, then it isn't enough. Until we learn to use our voices to say “this is wrong,” and say it loudly enough for someone to hear it, then we are only slapping Band-Aids on a gaping wound. But make no mistake – if we do that we will be an irritant to the power structures. We will be crossing that imaginary line that separates church and state. If people look at us and marvel about how we love, how we forgive, and share what we have with each other, then they will also chafe at our prophetic message.

Go back to the original question: What's the worst thing that can happen to us? That we lose our distinctiveness. That we become ignorable. Inconsequential. That we blend in seamlessly with our neighbors. But you know what? Life is sure easier when we do blend in. Nobody likes to be thought of as weird. Out of synch with the world around us. We don't want to let people run over us and take advantage of us. We don't want to be thought of as unsophisticated or

provincial. We don't want to deny ourselves the nice things that other people have. Christians are supposed to be good citizens and submit to the authority of the government, right? We don't want to be labeled as protestors or dissidents. Activists. And that's why Jesus prayed as he did: "Father, don't take them out of the world, but protect them in it." It wasn't, "deliver them from pain and hardship, and being disliked, and thought of as radicals and meddlers," but "deliver them from evil." The evils we need protecting from aren't always the usual ones thought of – drugs, sex, and rock and roll. The evils that tempt us most are the evils of laziness and apathy and fear. Choosing comfort and safety over obedience.

But Jesus never promised us safety. Quite the opposite, in fact. And the comfort he promised didn't have anything to do with the things that fill our houses. Here is what he did promise us: peace. Even in the midst of pain, and hardship, and persecution. Ironic, isn't it, that we would find peace in pursuing the very things we think will be our undoing? But it isn't a peace that is based on creature comforts, or good health. It's a peace that comes from nothing more than putting your life in the hands of a God who loves you, going where he sends you, doing what he asks of you. No matter how risky or uncomfortably it might look.

What's your worst fear? What's the worst thing that can happen to you? Probably not what you think.