

Were 11 Not Enough?
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, John 17:6-19
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I wonder how many of you have spent time diagramming sentences?

My eighth-grade teacher made a game of it. It was called “Rush Madly to the Board,” - and we did. We would slip out of those awkward seats with the desk attached, tripping over backpacks and throwing ourselves against the chalk board where we would race our opponent in diagramming complicated sentences.

We held so much power as we clutched that chalk. We got to assign order to words so that their meaning became clear. And I feel like we need a little of that today as we approach the scripture - especially the passage from the gospel of John.

In fact, I think that if we were meeting in person, perhaps I would drag some white boards in here and hand the ushers a couple of dry erase markers and ask them to rush madly to the board. Reading this passage is like reading Milton - it is poetic, it's constructed for poetic effect - and also it feels as if every line needs a footnote.

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world....they have kept your word....for the words you gave to me I have given to them ... I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world...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....But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they might have my joy....

Without context it takes a moment to orient ones' self into who is even speaking - but it is Jesus. This is a passage in which John portrays Jesus speaking to God. Just before this passage, in the end of chapter 16, Jesus has told the disciples that he is leaving this world, and has instructed them, “Take Courage! I have conquered the world.” And then he looks to heaven and begins talking with God.

Significantly, this passage that frames Jesus' leaving the world and returning God rhymes with the opening passage of John, I think:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ... He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.”

John portrayed Jesus as the Logos. As the Word. As the Word of God that God sent into the world. For God so loved the world...

And that play between the Word and the World certainly echoes throughout John, and in this passage in particular. But there is something peculiar here that alerts us that this passage is mainly

about the disciples. “I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.” Jesus is praying for the disciples, for the 12 disciples, and Jesus prays these things:

1. That God would protect the disciples in unity of heart and mind
2. That Jesus’ joy be made complete in the disciples
3. That the disciples be kept from the clutches of the evil one
4. That God would sanctify them in truth

These are all about the care and keeping of the disciples for their ministry in the world. I read that that word that we have here as “Sanctify” is not so much about cleansing or making pure but about equipping. Jesus understands that in his absence, his disciples will need to be protected from disunity and from powers that are not of God, and Jesus hopes that his disciples will be formed by joy and truth. And their perseverance for the long haul is his focus.

Let’s remember - the Gospels are about the time that Jesus is walking about on the earth, fully human, and the epistles are about the church after Jesus was no longer present in the flesh. And these two passages in the lectionary today are like a thin place between the two, where you can step from one story into the other.

The Acts passage is about choosing a new disciple to replace Judas, who had betrayed Jesus. Were 11 disciples not enough? Was it in the bylaws that there had to be 12 disciples? Judas left and there was a vacancy and they had to call a special council meeting? It seems that the 12 disciples were correlated with the 12 tribes of Israel. And to the extent that Jesus is understood to be the fulfillment of the promise of a king for Israel, the reconstitution of the 12 disciples represents the coming together of the broken kingdom, the divided tribes.

And did you catch the number of believers mentioned in the Acts passage - it’s easy to miss. But the text says that the crowd numbered “about 120 persons.” What a weird number - except that there are no throw away numbers in the Bible. 120 is a number related to 12. All of these details are connected. And as the disciples work to fill in that 12th slot, they insist that the new disciple be a disciple who knows the whole story, who has been with Jesus throughout his ministry, and who witnessed the resurrection.

These passages come together to highlight that Jesus understood his ministry to be one that would be carried on in his disciples, and his disciples represent this coming together, this movement toward completion, this restoration of the broken kingdom. Towards wholeness.

What, then, might this passage hold for you and for me?

One of the truths it holds for us is this: we should understand our tribe to be only a part of the whole. No one of us, and no set of us - here in this congregation, this denomination, this brand of progressive Christianity, this whatever community in which you find your identity, in which we find our identity - can be THE ministry of Jesus. But this is good news. This is gospel.

The work of Jesus in this world is tied up in redeeming broken and disparate community. The one whom we know as a shepherd who brings lost sheep back into the fold is understood to unify the

tribes of Israel, the tribes of Jacob's sons and grandsons - and to be the catalyst for the unity of the people of God in what lies ahead.

And there is more: we have a particular story to tell about Jesus overcoming death-dealing power. The work of Jesus in this world is tied up in tending to the leadership of those who will bear witness to the resurrection so that we might live as Easter people, formed in the wilderness and testifying to love.

Finally, we know Jesus' prayer for disciples. Jesus prayed over the 12 disciples that they would be protected from disunity and from powers that are not of God, that they would be formed as a people undergirded by joy and truth. What might it mean to claim that prayer for our own discipleship? To be protected from disunity and from powers that are not of God? To live into joy and truth?

We follow a risen Lord. The work of Jesus in this world is tied up in redeeming broken community, in tending to the leadership of those who will bear witness to the resurrection, and in protecting disciples from disunity and from powers that are not of God so that they might be formed as people undergirded by joy and truth.

Family of God, so may it be.