

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, May 13, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: John 17:6-19

Sermon: What in the World

In a world where people can buy guns at the corner store

In a country where the sale, possession and use of marijuana will be soon legal....

In a province where teaching math by the discovery method might someday be illegal...

Isn't it good to know that Ottawa City Council is on the ball.

Last week our city council passed a motion allowing churches to hold live musical concerts. Yes, you heard me correctly. It is now legal for churches to hold concerts, where music will be performed by singers and instrumentalists who are actually alive.

Like me, you might find yourself scratching your head and hoping the city didn't spend a lot of time or money making this effort. I've been to a lot of concerts in churches already. Concerts where I have enjoyed classical music and popular music. I've taken in secular music and religious music. I've been to rock concerts and folk festivals and country music hoe-downs. I've been to jazz liturgies and choral oratories. I've seen professional musicians and volunteer amateur musicians perform. In fact I don't think I've ever been to a concert where the musicians were not live. And I don't want to think about what the alternative would be...

The motion passed by our City Council seems to be one piece of a whole city initiative, which is meant to encourage spaces like churches and mosques, community centres and temples to use those spaces for musical performances. It's not that we have been breaking the law by holding concerts, says city council, it's just that now we have the assurance that concerts are not in conflict with any of the city's other zoning guidelines.

We don't have to hide the pipe organ in the catacombs anymore. Soon everyone will be in on our secret – Rideau Park really likes music.

There are lots of times when I wonder what the world "out there" thinks we are really up to in these sacred halls and sanctuaries. Is it just one long prayer fest and guilt-load marathon? Are we all self-righteous goody-goodies who never laugh or tell a joke? (they should come to euchre...)

In our own generation "going to church" has become a practice that many people have never experienced. And that can lead them to form some unusual misconceptions. We are not alone in this. In the early generations of the Jesus' movement, the relationship between the followers of Jesus and the wider world were pretty ambivalent.

Some of the early believers were criticized because it was believed that they were cannibals, for they claimed to eat the body and to drink the blood of Christ.

Another misconception was that they were political rebels, anarchists because they did not accept the divinity of the Roman Caesar. They insisted on calling only Jesus “Lord.”

The emperor Nero believed that it was the early Christians who caused Rome to burn. Christian women who would not marry non-Christians were martyred, and (in some cultures) Christian men who refused polygamy were shunned.

Christians would not serve as soldiers or public servants because that meant pledging faith in Caesar as a god.

From the very beginning of our history, the relationship between Christians and the world around us has been ambivalent. Certainly there were centuries where Christianity was the dominant faith. But given human nature, and the temptation to abuse power, those weren't the best years in our history either.

Today, in the reading from the gospel of John, we have a glimpse of that ambivalence. This is a passage where Jesus is praying for his followers, in particular his disciples and friends. In the prayer, he is envisioning the ways that they will continue in his ministry after he is gone. For Jesus it was a time where he was longing to hold on to them in love, and yet knowing this was a relationship that was drawing to its close. How, then, to prepare them for the kind of hero-worship that he has experienced in the world, when things are going well. And how to prepare them for the sorrow and persecution of the world when things are going wrong.

There is no better gospel writer than John to help us explore that ambivalent dynamic between the faith community and the world beyond our doors. The author John has a way of spiraling around any spiritual concept, this is his way of drawing us deeper and closer to the holy truth, but never forcing us in. In words typical of John's theology, if you finish reading this passage feeling like you have just stepped off a twirling merry-go-round, then you are in the right frame of mind.

John's gospel was written for followers of Jesus in an interesting time. They were in the midst of significant change. We can tell from John's language and his knowledge of Jewish tradition, that (like Jesus) John was at one time deeply connected and profoundly immersed in Jewish faith.

But we also know that the followers of Jesus were less and less welcome in Jewish synagogues and institutions. Though they were not yet called Christians, followers of Jesus' Way were critical of those who had cooperated with the Romans, leading to Jesus' crucifixion.

They also preached Jesus message of inclusion and economic justice, which didn't always sit so with those who were accustomed to exploiting their religious power. Out of his own ambivalence, John saw himself as a Jew, yet he preached and wrote some of the most anti-Semitic passages in the New Testament.

John's gospel was also written after the fall of Jerusalem, when the Romans had given up trying to get along with the Jewish authorities and the rebel factions. The Romans

destroyed the temple, and ordered all Jews to leave the Holy City or to be killed. In that time, then, it was more convenient for the followers of Jesus and to become identified as a separate group – to be identified as Christian and European, rather than Jewish and Palestinian.

Except the followers of Jesus didn't like the Romans much either. There were several bouts of anti-Christian persecution, because they would not participate in Caesar worship. In those times Christians were often imprisoned, and alienated from family and friends, they were executed and fed to the lions.

So we find that the followers of Jesus were used to being betwixt and between, not Roman, not Jewish, not yet something new. As we read in Jesus' prayer, their presence in the world was full of many things: Love for creation, as God intended creation to be – and yet critical of human exploitation and social injustice. They had great compassion for the children of God – for all people – regardless of social status or gender or ethnicity – and yet they also bore some fear and loathing for those who persecuted and conspired against them.

You can see that the relationship of Jesus' followers in the world has always been complicated. In this one prayer alone Jesus says that

- the disciples are chosen OUT OF the world, but that they are to remain IN the world,
- that they are HATED BY the world, because they are not OF the world,
- that they NEED PROTECTION in the world, from an "evil one" who is already AT WORK IN the world, but that they should not be TAKEN FROM the world.
- And so, just as God sent Jesus TO the world, because God loves the world, Jesus commissions his disciples to go out INTO the world and spread that good news of God's love.
- And we are left to wonder: What in the world does THAT mean?

I told you reading John is like riding the merry-go-round.

But I don't think any book of the Bible speaks to our real human condition in the way that the gospel of John does. He gets that life in the world is complicated. He gets that the world is a confusing place, full of misunderstanding. And he gets that the world doesn't always "get" us.

The jist of this prayer is that, as followers of Jesus, we should be living with HIS faith and HIS commitment and HIS compassion while we are in the world. When John spirals around this idea of being IN the world but not OF the world, perhaps he is urging us to be so centred in our connection to God, that whatever goes on in the world around us, we still dwell deeply in that heart of faith. And whenever we feel that connection with God weakening that we might go out into the world and find God again. Because we are just as likely to find God in the beauty of nature, or the kindness of a neighbour, as we are in even the most beautiful church.

The power of Jesus' prayer is that Christ's light dwells in us, and the darkness has never overcome it. That was his prayer for his friends, when he knew better than they, the predicaments they would find themselves in. That is the answer God gives us when

we find ourselves in any “what in the world” moment – Look for me in your heart – look for me in the world - because I will never leave you alone. Thanks be to God.