

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

SUNDAY, MAY 24, 2009

REV. WILLIAM L. LOVE

*THE JOY OF CHRIST FULFILLED*

Acts 1:15-17

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

When Garrison Keillor left *A Prairie Home Companion* in 1987 to move to Denmark, he published a book of stories he had told on the show. In the Introduction, he wrote about his leaving home:

*Sweet corn was our family's weakness. We were prepared to resist atheistic Communism, immoral Hollywood, hard liquor, gambling and dancing, smoking, fornication, but if Satan had come around with sweet corn, we at least would have listened to what he had to sell. We might not have bought it but we would've had him in and given him a cup of coffee. ... Sunday after church, when the pot roast was done and the potatoes were boiled and mashed and a pot of water was boiling — only then would Dad run out with a bushel basket and pick thirty ears of corn. We shucked it clean in five seconds per ear and popped it in the pot for a few minutes. A quick prayer, a little butter and salt, and that is as good as it gets. People have searched the world over for something better and didn't find it because it's not there. ...*

*If I had eaten more sweet corn, maybe I'd still be in Minnesota, sitting between the wall and the kitchen table, munching away line after line like a typewriter, but I lost touch with people who raised corn and with their church and wasn't invited to Sunday dinner anymore and slowly lost my bearings, and felt lost at home. In Minneapolis, they tore down Met Stadium for a polyester ballfield with a roof over it, a ghostly greenish plastic baseball mall, and all those lovely summer nights were lost. The night train to Chicago was taken off, another broken romance, and all the little truck farms around the Twin Cities disappeared that sold fresh tomatoes, squash, and sweet corn at roadside stands or off the tailgate of a truck. Immense shopping malls sprang up in their place like fungus on the grass. One Christmas, after I wrote a book, I stood autographing copies of it for six hours at a chain store in the Ridgedale complex, as large and bewildering as an Air Force base, and felt its peculiar dementia, low and steadily throbbing from fluorescent lights, air conditioners, and electronic systems including synthesized violins playing homogenous hymns to the anesthetized people, and knew that somewhere we had gone wrong. ...*

*Life is complicated and not for the timid. It's an experience that when it's done, it will take us a while to get over it. We'll look back on the good things we surrendered in favor of deadly trash and wish we had returned and reclaimed them. We may sit in a cool corner of hell and wish we had kept the ballpark, built the shops elsewhere, and not killed off all those cornfields. [Keillor, **Leaving Home**, xiv-xvi]*

It is easy to go wrong, to lose sight of that which is valuable in life, and to lose the rituals which celebrate life, like the eating of sweet corn. It is easy to surrender the things which are valuable for what seems better, or expedient, or at least innocuous. It is easy to surrender when we simply lose heart.

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The disciples had joined up with Jesus a few years earlier. They had traveled with him where he went. They had heard him teach and, at the end of the day, if there were something that they had not understood, they could ask him.

For those years, he had been their mentor. What they understood about life and what it meant and how to live it, they had learned from Jesus. Their lives had changed in so many ways that it was as if they were starting anew.

Some of it had been confusing. Some of it had been frightening. Especially on Good Friday.

Then came Easter, which may have been even more confusing at first.

For 40 days after Easter, they had the risen Christ with them. And they could again ask their questions. And then Jesus ascended. And they were left alone. He was not there for them to save up their questions for the end of the day.

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This past week, the Christian church commemorated the Ascension of Christ. So, in our observance of the Christian year, we stand with the disciples in those first days when they faced life without Jesus physically present to answer their questions.

Even in those first uncomfortable days, Christ was not apart from them. In the last hours before the crucifixion, Jesus had prayed for them and for the times they would face after the Ascension.

Jesus prayed to God: *Protect them in Your name, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them.... But now I am coming to You.*

Jesus prayed for the disciples (and for those who would come to believe because of their faithfulness — and through the centuries that includes you and me). He prayed: *I have given them your word, and the world hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.*

They were — as we are — in the world. And to be a Christian, I think, means to be in the world — not to withdraw from the world or to isolate ourselves from the pain and trouble of the world. Christ did not withdraw from any of it.

To be *in* the world, as Christ was *in* the world.

Also to know that we are not *of* the world, just as Christ was not *of* the world.

The world (as this gospel uses the term) was not a warm and welcoming place. It was not a place that gave human beings life but which sought to define life in its own terms — and its terms can include greed and prejudice and any number of other qualities that are dressed up so prettily that they do not seem so bad. Just business as usual. That's just the way life is.

Garrison Keillor has said that New York City is a good place to be a Christian. It is like being back in the days of the apostles, when the world around you was clearly not Christian and the choice was clear. The lines between faith and culture can get blurred. And people can get too comfortable with their faith.

Even in seemingly benign ways, the world makes less and less room for God. It was the most religious people on earth who cried, *Crucify him.*

*In* the world. Not *of* the world.

In the movie *The Mission*, there were two Jesuit priests in 18th century South America. One had established a mission among the natives, who had been hostile to missionaries. He had gone into their land armed with his faith and a flute. He had won their trust.

The second had come to the first priest as a soldier, seeking to join the order after killing his own brother and being unable to deal with his guilt.

When soldiers came to take possession of the lands of the mission, which were no longer protected by law, and to capture the natives for slave trade, the two priests must decide how to respond.

The second priest takes up arms again to defend the mission with whatever force and violence is necessary. He goes to the first priest to ask for a blessing.

The first priest refuses to give a blessing. *If violence is the answer, he says, then Might Makes Right, and I am not strong enough to live in a world like that.*

*In* the world, but not *of* the world.

Christ was, I think, strong enough not to live in a world like that — and not to leave a world like that as our only option — but to die that we and our world could be different from that.

And to rise from the dead to give us life — a life in which we do not have to settle for less than God's will for us — a life the New Testament writers call Resurrection.

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Not life where give and take are calculated to get as much as possible while giving up as little as necessary. Not life that uses the arithmetic of gain to have more (even if it comes at the expense of others.) That kind of life will serve you well enough in the world.

But we are not called to be in the world and of the world. We are not *of* the world, as Christ is not *of* the world.

That life does not seek power over others to gain advantage for oneself — but giving (and forgiving) as a way of finding intimacy with others, which is a reflection of intimacy with God.

*That they may be one, Jesus prayed, even as we are one.*

People who are in love give themselves (not merely their possessions but **themselves**) in all kinds of extravagant ways. In a sense, losing themselves to find themselves to be more fully themselves than ever before.

The life that is not of the world that Christ gives is kind of like that.

*Whoever has the Son has life*, the epistle of John says.

That life is *already* in us. Yet, as we live in the world, we see that it is *not yet* fulfilled. *Already*, but *not yet*.

Karl Marx called religion *the opiate of the people*.

If this eternal life is only *not yet*, only *pie in the sky by and by*, and if that far off eternal life becomes the means to manipulate people here and now — or to distract them from beginning to try to make this world like the world to come in justice and mercy, then Marx is right. That kind of religion is only an opiate, keeping us stupefied while the world has its way.

We are in the world — and we need to see the world clearly. We also bring to the world a life that is not of the world — life in Christ that is already breaking into us and the world.

When I was in the service and the date of my discharge approached, I developed a *short-timer's attitude*. A part of me was already preoccupied with becoming a civilian. I gave a part of myself to thoughts of being a civilian and what I would do when I got out. I still did my job as well as ever, but there was a difference. No longer was that job of ultimate importance. There was, for me, a more important reality. I was not yet a civilian, but I was already becoming one. I was in the Air Force, but I was no longer of the Air Force.

We are in the world. But there is a part of us that is already becoming like Christ, already living eternal life.

That in the world which seeks to get rather than give — that thinks anything is okay as long as no one gets hurt and you don't get caught, but takes no notice of internal injuries — that part of the world does not like our becoming like Christ.

*The world hated them because they are not of the world.*

Jesus prayed for us that we may know that **in the world** is not all that we are.

In a children's sermon several years ago, I asked what we should do if someone does something cruel. If we do something cruel in return, however emotionally satisfying that may feel, we have let their cruelty change us to be like them. If we do something kind, we have not let cruelty change us but have given them something which may help them to become kind.

In the world, not of the world.

In the in-between times when it's easy to lose our way, life is still complicated and not for the timid. It's never too late. Garrison Keillor came back to Minnesota, and the Houston Astros, whose indoor baseball mall led to the invention of artificial turf, now play on real grass in their new stadium, and it doesn't get much better than sweet corn and home-grown tomatoes.

The writer of the epistle says, *I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.*

As we live that eternal life, we will experience the joy of Christ being fulfilled in us.