

## Easter 7 (5-16-2021)

“Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” In this prayer that Jesus prays for his disciples, he asks his father to sanctify the disciples in the truth that is God's word. And he sends the disciples into the world as bearers of that word.

And as the new representatives of the community for which Jesus prayed, we need to ask ourselves, what does it mean to be sanctified? And what word do our lives speak? In my upbringing, sanctification meant separation from certain kinds of behaviors. I was constantly reminded about not belonging to the world, keeping myself unspotted by the world. And that was pretty much defined as not drinking, not dancing, not smoking, not playing cards, not going to movies. It was a religion defined in many ways by negatives, a Christianity defined by all the things that we don't do. And that was called sanctification. Is that what it means to be holy? To be holier than thou? Is that what it means to be sanctified in God's truth? It doesn't actually look very much like how Jesus behaved.

On the other hand, there is the very real temptation of being identified with and assimilated into our culture so thoroughly that we become indistinguishable from the world. That nobody looking at us would ever guess that there's anything different about who we are and how we live from the way that everyone else does. What do I mean when I talk about our culture and being shaped by the world in that way? Well, defining ourselves by what we own or what we know or what we do for a living that really sets us apart from or above everybody else. Making sure that we socialize with the right crowd. Seeking status and power. Serving ourselves rather than others. Caring about our own comfort and convenience more than we care about the real physical needs of the poor. Associating only with people who are like us, people with whom we feel comfortable. People who share our values and opinions and world views. Think about the group of disciples whom Jesus called to be one. They were all over the political and cultural map.

Now, think about what it is that we get outraged by. What is it that upsets us? Is it the things that would upset Jesus? Or the things that upset us culturally? Are we more outraged by the mess that homeless people make in our cities when we see trash

around where they live, or by the conditions that drove them into homelessness? What do we get outraged about?

Are we outraged when we learned that a major grocery store executive cut the hazardous pay bonuses for essential grocery store workers, and then made a record profit in his own salary because everybody was shopping and getting groceries in this pandemic year? And so, his own salary went up by several million even as his workers were struggling to make ends meet and still faced with the daily hazard of the pandemic. What we get outraged by tells us a lot about what our values are. And the question is always do they align with the values of Jesus?

Tony Campolo, a well-known evangelical speaker, tells about an experience he had while he was in Hawaii for a conference. His body was still confused by the time change and he couldn't sleep so he found himself in a greasy spoon diner at 3:30 in the morning. There he was trying to figure out whether to order breakfast or dinner because his body didn't know what time it was, when in walks a group of prostitutes taking a break from walking the Honolulu streets all night. And he overheard one of the prostitutes say to another, "Tomorrow's my birthday." The other responded, "What do you want me to do? Throw you a party? Bake you a cake?" The woman answered, "Nah, I'm going to be 39 years old, and I've never had a birthday party in my life. Why should I have one now? I just wanted someone to know, that's all."

Campolo said, "when I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the woman had left, then I called over the guy behind the counter. I asked him, 'do they come in here every night?' 'Yeah,' he answered. 'The one right next to me. Does she come in here every night?' 'Yeah,' he said. 'That's Agnes. She comes in here every night. Why do you want to know?' 'Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her right here tomorrow night?.' So, they did. At 3:30 the next morning, when Agnes came into the diner for her usual break from walking the streets, she walked into a surprise birthday party, complete with crepe paper decorations and a cake. And she was just overwhelmed with joy.

A bit later, Campolo offered a prayer. When the prayer was over, the owner of the diner said, "hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong

to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, Campolo answered. "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning." The owner waited a moment, then almost sneered as he answered, "No, you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that." "Well," Campolo concludes when he tells the story, "That's the kind of church Jesus came to create. I don't know where we got the other one that's so prim and proper."

Jesus was the kind of person who threw birthday parties for women who were walking the streets. And the society didn't have a lot of good words to say to him for doing that. It didn't fit with their values. He wasn't defined by all the things he didn't do. He was defined by the way he loved. The way he saw people. The way he reached out and cared about people.

Tony Campolo was practicing incarnational ministry, and we're called to do that too. What do we Incarnate? What word do our lives speak? Are we Christ bearers? Or do our lives speak the ordinary words of the world? Jesus calls us to live in a way that makes our lives speak God's word to the world. We can't do that simply by wishing it, or by focusing all our willpower on it. Our lives can speak God's word only if we allow God's word to live within us. Only if we soak it in. But when we pray that the presence of Christ will fill us and that the love of Christ will flow out of us to touch others, we can be sure that God will answer that prayer. It is Jesus' own prayer for us. "Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

Let us pray: God of Love and Grace. Protect us from both pride and complacency. Keep us from supporting the world's goals and from living by its values, and so fill us with the presence of Christ, Your living and powerful word, that our lives may speak Your word to the world. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.