

**Echoes: The People of Christ**

John 3:16-17; 17:9-19

John 3:16-17. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

John 17:9-19. *I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. 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. 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. 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. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

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Jesus kinda talks funny in John, doesn't he? In the other gospels it's all short, pithy sayings and parables. In John he gives these long circular discourses that seem to wander all over the place and come back to where they started. But at least those discourses make you sit down and puzzle over them, which is always the best way to read scripture. In this prayer in chapter 17, Jesus wanders around the question we've looking at since early January – what is the relationship of the Christian and the world? So let's sit down and puzzle over it.

We should begin, though, with those verses from John 3, where Jesus says, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” We should start there. God's primary relation to the world is love. In fact, because God loved the world, God in Christ entered it and lived there for thirty-three years, enjoying the world's goodness, enduring the world's hardships. Now, as we come to John 17, Jesus' time in the world is drawing to a close. Verse 11: *And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me.* Jesus was God in the world, but now it is his disciples' turn. They are to be his surrogates there – and God help them. Verse 14: *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 for all that Jesus has been in the world, he has not belonged to the world, and the world has hated him.* In the same way, we, his disciples who are to be his surrogates in the world, don't belong there either, and are just as likely to incur the world's hatred. Verses 15 and 16: *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.* Again, Jesus' followers don't belong to the world, but they're supposed to be there. Finally, verse 18: *As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.* Although John doesn't ever put it this simply – God forbid John should ever be clear and straightforward – Jesus' point is sometimes summarized in this way: We are to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. We are not supposed to separate ourselves from our surrounding culture –remember, God so loved the world – but we *are* supposed to be different from it, as he was.

So, *part of* the world, and yet *different* from the world. Let's start with the second part of that. How are Christians supposed to be different from other people? It's important to ask this, because so many people get it wrong. Nearly everyone agrees that Christians are supposed to be different, but so many of us describe that difference in terms of the most superficial behaviors: smoking, drinking, chewing tobacco, dancing, listening to this or that kind of music, wearing yoga pants, getting tattoos, and most frequently of all – cussing. No, I don't know why people seem to think that the mark of a true Christian is never using vulgar words. (Can I ask you something? Please stop apologizing to me when one of those words accidentally slips out. The truth is, until you apologized for it, I probably didn't even notice. I have three children in their twenties. You cannot shock me.) It's the silliest, most superficial standard we could come up with, and yet that seems to be the one people hold on to. Yes, Jesus came to raise up a new people, a different sort of people, but that difference is more than just saying "goshdarn it." The difference that should mark us is far deeper than that. It has to do with radically different priorities.

Let me give just a few examples. Our society believes that a person's value is measured by how much money and how many possessions he has, so we should sacrifice everything in order to gain more and bigger and newer possessions. Jesus says what matters is what we give away. Our culture believes that people in highly paid jobs are worth more than other people. The Bible teaches that we are all of equal value, but our priority should *always* be the poor, the oppressed, the alone, and the defenseless. Our culture is obsessed with sex. It treats sexual gratification as a supreme goal that should be pursued as often and as indiscriminately as possible. People who have a lot of sex with a lot of different partners are admired and envied in our society. Our faith, in contrast, teaches that sex is just one of many expressions of love between equals who are committed to each other, and not the most important of those. Our culture teaches that being physically attractive is more important than being smart, honest, or caring. Our faith replies, "No, it isn't." Our culture teaches that being young – or at least *looking* young – is better than being old. Our faith values all ages for their different strengths. Our culture teaches us that people who are different from us are threatening; our faith teaches that people who are different from us are just other people who are loved by our God. The world teaches us that we need to take care of number one; our faith teaches us that God has our back and we need to look out for others – especially the poor, the weak, the alone, and the defenseless. I know, I know, I just repeated myself. But I only did so *because the Bible keeps repeating that one!* This is how we're supposed to be different.

Then, because of this difference, Jesus says that the world will hate us. Really? Is that true? I don't *feel* hated. But let's think about some of the differences I just listed. What would happen if everyone lived as our faith teaches us to live? I actually think our economy would collapse. A new, healthier economy would emerge, but our current one couldn't stand. Our current economy is fueled by greed, envy, pride, and lust, and in theory at least we reject all of that. Our entertainment industry would be next. Television and movies celebrate violence, revenge, the glorification of physical beauty, and indiscriminate sex. In theory, we reject all the above. The priorities of our faith challenge the priorities of our culture at every turn. Does the world hate us? Maybe not, but it should. If it doesn't, that only means that we've represented Christ's priorities very badly indeed. We are supposed to be more different than we usually are.

But we are *not* supposed to be separate. As different as Jesus urges us to be, he does not tell us to distance ourselves from the world. Instead he sends us out to be in the world as he was in the world. And how was that? How was Jesus in the world? He fed hungry people and cared for sick people, loved unlovable people and touched dirty people, yelled at religious prigs, enjoyed a good meal, had friends he would do anything for, played with children, lived simply and owned only what he needed, loved people he had never actually met, prayed a lot. Now *that* was different. Right in the middle of diseased humanity, he stood out like a healthy thumb, and his difference was rightly taken as a challenge to the status quo. We should be like that. Like our master, we too are to be right in the middle of the world, but disconcertingly different. Like him, we are to be yeast giving life to a dull lump, salt giving flavor to a bland stew, light showing the way through a dim and windowless corridor.

I've asked for over a month, how are we supposed to relate to our world? Like that.