

In the World but Not Of It
(Genesis 1:1-5, 25-27, 31 / Mark 4:35-41 / John 17:7-16)

Are there times when you read the scriptures and have trouble understanding what they are trying to say, because the messages you get seem to be contradictory? I chose our scriptures this morning, because they seem to be saying very different and opposite things about how we should live in the world that God has created. In Genesis we read that God saw everything that he had made, and lo it was very good. Good. The world is good. But in 1 John 2:15 we read “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him.” Are we to love the world, because it is good, or are we to avoid the world, because it is evil? Are we to stop and smell the roses, glory in the beauty and goodness that can be found, enjoy food and drink and take vacations? Or are we to try to shun the world? Are we to walk through this life on tip toes so that not filth will stick to us? Maybe that’s overstating it, but it does seem to me that in the scriptures we are hearing two different voices.

Oneupsmanship. You’ve heard the word. You know what I’m talking about when I talk about oneupsmanship. It is a fact of our lives and of our world, from the time that we are children until the time that we die. Go to any playground. Two boys are jousting with words. “My toy is better than your toy.” “Well my Dad’s bigger than your dad, so you better keep your mouth shut.” One car rolls down the road, in the back window a sticker proclaims, “Proud parent of an honor roll student at Jackson High.” Another behind it bears the message, “My ordinary average kid can beat up your honor roll student any day.” A man drives up in his new Cadillac. It’s so hot you burn your finger if you touch it. Then his neighbor roars in and parks next to him in his new Humvee. One man boasts, “I went to Yale.” “Well I want to Harvard,” crows another. “That’s nothing,” say a third. “I went to OSU, and to top it off I was the quarterback on their winning football team.” A prominent preacher of a thriving church was once criticized for having bought a million dollar home? He replied that there is nothing wrong with it. God rewards those who do well. I don’t know. I don’t even own my own house. But I guess I’m farther up the scale than Mother Teresa. She doesn’t have a nickel to her name. Oneupsmanship.

You might think that oneupsmanship existed only in secular society, in the world. But it even creeps into our lives of faith. “What’s the membership of your church. You have about 120 on the rolls don’t you. Our church has 500 members and activities for every interest and age group.” “Really, at our church we have 10,000 members. We have a parking lot with bus shuttles for Sunday services. Why we take in over “\$20,000.00 in every offering and we support missionaries three foreign countries.” Then there is church participation. “I went to church every Sunday but two last year. Fifty times, imagine that.” Another counters, “Oh well I went to church every Sunday, plus I was on committees and board and in the choir. I must have been at church 200 times last year. Now the pastor was there counting everything at least 400 times, but that doesn’t count, because she gets paid.” Whose a better provider, whose a better citizen, whose a better Christian—oneupsmanship is a part of life.

And so we come to this passage from the Gospel of John. Jesus is telling the disciples that God wants them to be in the world, but they are, nevertheless, not of the world. In the world, but not of it. That’s what I want to focus on. What does it mean for

us to be in the world, but not of it? It is a difficult passage. For me, it comes with a lot of baggage, because anytime we try to keep ourselves from being worldly, we can stray into legalism. Philip Yancey tells of his own experience with legalism. "I grew up," he says, "In a church that drew sharp line between 'the age of Law' and 'the age of Grace.' While ignoring most moral prohibitions from the Old Testament, we had our own pecking order rivaling the Orthodox Jew's. At the top were smoking and drinking. . . . Movies ranked just below these vices, with many church members refusing even to attend *The Sound of Music*. Rock music, then, its infancy, was likewise regarded as an abomination, quite possibly demonic in origin." Yancey tells of other proscriptions that people followed or not, depending on how spiritual they were—wearing makeup and jewelry, reading from the Sunday paper, playing or watching sports on Sunday, mixed swimming, skirt length for girls, hair length for boys. "My visits to other churches have convinced me that this ladder-like approach to spirituality is nearly universal. Catholics, Mennonites, Churches of Christ, Lutherans, and Southern Baptists all have their own custom agenda of legalism. You gain the church's, and presumably God's approval by following the prescribed pattern." (What's So Amazing About Grace, p 30.)

How do you get past this constant struggle to climb ladders? Ladders of corporate power. Ladders of spiritual recognition. I have a suspicion that underneath it all is the need to prove to God, that we have passed the test; to prove to others in our world, that we are worthy of friendship, to prove to ourselves that we are okay people, that when we look at ourselves in the mirror in the morning we can like what we see—we don't have to be ashamed. We have to build that foundation, by succeeding in the world of work, by succeeding in the world of faith. Be in the world, but not of it, seems to be Christ's counsel to us. And yet how easily it can be just one more ladder to climb.

What does it mean to be in the world, but not of it? If we are every to get past oneupsmanship we need to understand why it is that It is good to worship God. We need to know the real reasons it is good to avoid being "of the world?" It is good and desirable to worship God because God is good, and beautiful, and loving. God is strong and just and compassionate. God is fair, and wise. God has created great beauty and goodness in the world. Christian people have always reacted to the beauty of the world in two ways. Knowing how powerful beauty, in art, in nature, in music is, some have admonished their followers to stay away, lest their hearts be lured away to love something more than the love God. Make's you wonder about their understanding of God. Is there anything in this whole wide world that could possible be more beautiful or desirable than God? Would it even be a contest? Others celebrate that beauty and use it in worship as a way of drawing people to praise God. If you truly believe that every good gift comes from God, then you can rejoice in the skill of a pilot, even if his moral life is a wreck and he curses God to his friend. Whether found in atheist or Christian, abilities, skills, work done that enriches human life are gifts from God. "Oh no they're not," someone might object. "My musical ability is there only because I put in countless hours of practice." And yet no one created themselves, or endowed themselves with the abilities that develop during their lives. They did not breathe into themselves the breath of life. They did not create the knowledge and learning that was passed on to them, or the years of development that created the country in which they found opportunity to grow. The skills in every life are God's handiwork. In the pilot, whether good person or bad, is an ability, God's gift, that now developed takes people

safely thousand of miles in just a few hours. We worship God because God is worthy of worship.

More than that we worship God because God heals us. The word in Greek which is translated "saved" also means "made whole." To be saved and to be made whole. Same Greek word. Once Jesus came upon ten lepers, and he healed them all. Nine did what Jesus commanded and went straight to the rabbi to document their healing, as the law required. One returned and fell on his knees to express the depth of his gratitude. If a reporter had talked to him afterward, the conversation might have gone like this. "You know there were ten of you that were healed. Weren't they supposed to be here too?" "I don't know," he might reply. "The law says they are supposed to go to the priest. I'm not here because I'm supposed to be. I'm here because my soul is glad for what God has done. I'm here because I want to be."

It is easy to criticize lists of things that are good and things that are bad. It is easy to find fault with labeling certain things worldly and other things spiritual. It is easy to criticize the attempt to clearly draw a line between what is permissible and what is not. It might be easy for me to criticize someone who has "scruples" against drinking. But for someone whose life has been torn apart by alcohol addiction or abuse, who have struggled long and hard it is not something that you take lightly. Be in the world, but no of it. Why? First of all when Christ talks about the "world" he is not talking about the beauty of creation, which clothes the lilies in splendor greater than Solomon could imagine. Tertullian once complained that if God wanted us to wear blue clothing he would have created blue sheep. And yet, it is hard to imagine that God, who created the tail feathers of a pea cock or the wings of a butterfly would have problems with lipstick or nail polish. But amidst all of the beauty of creation, there is real wickedness, real evil, real harm to be suffered and inflicted. In the news the other day, that our government, and some others are contemplating sanctions against nations who trafficking in young girls as slaves. In the 21st century people still sold as slaves. Real evil. A writer at the New York Times was fired for plagiarism, yet news organizations still push their reporters to the limit. In colleges you publish or perish. A large percentage of truck drivers on the road fudge their log sheets. If they don't they will lose their jobs. It is impossible to get where the need to be and follow the rules. In many countries there are deplorable human rights violations. Real evil. What does Paul call it? Powers and principalities and spiritual wickedness in high places. Sometimes when we try to make lists of right and wrong, we miss the larger issue. William Romanowski writes, "The attitudes, desires and values of materialism are a powerful force in North American life. Forty-two percent of Americans attend church weekly, but 70 percent visit a mall. According to the New York Times, the average teenager goes shopping fifty-four times a year. 'Living in a material world,' as Madonna's song puts it, affects personal and communal identity. We don't just buy and sell goods; we purchase dreams, experiences, and pleasures. In this sense, consumerism is a kind of salvation; purchasing a product is advertised as the solution to every problem." (*Eyes Wide Open, Looking for God in Popular Culture*, p. 133)

A man has a problem with drinking. He wonders, "What would happen if I were to be drunk one day, and in my driving kill a young boy or girl? Could God ever forgive me?" Is there any sin that is so deep, or so hard that is it more powerful than the willing

death of Christ on the cross? God's got all eternity to work on blotting out our sins, changing us. But we have only one life now, and that family has only one boy.

Some people say, "If I can be forgiven of anything, then I can do anything that I want do to? As if it would be wonderful to drink, or have sex, or eat, or spend money without limits. The problem with what Jesus calls the world is that it sells dreams, and experiences and pleasures that are supposed to meet basic needs. But they don't. Often they lead to hurt instead. And even when they don't, they can't hold a candle to the beauty of God's presence.

In his book *Rainbows for the Fallen World*, Seerveld writes about the way he thinks that art works from a Christian perspective. He says that there is nothing that art may not or should not display. It can bring to canvas or print "anything afloat in the world." It will do it, however, "in a way that shall expose sin as a . . . waste and shall show obedient life as a joy forever, thereby building up the faithful and making strangers to the faith, curious and desirous of joining such reconciling fun in our Father's world!"

When I talked about drinking and driving I did not mean to single out one problem. There are many. Gambling. Pornography. Shopping. Eating disorders. Even television addiction. Lots of things that get a hold of people. Resentment, pride, self abasement, constant guilt, envy are only a few of the things that bring only hurt and pain. Can God forgive? You bet! Does God want those whom God loves to travel down roads like this. No!

To be in the world, but not of it. What does that mean? I don't think it means that we turn our heads away from a rainbow or stop listening to music. It is hard to believe that he who turned water into a wine, lest a wedding banquet be spoiled, who referred to the kingdom of God as a feast, who was criticized for eating and drinking with sinners is counseling us against enjoyment. How do you understand it? What does it mean for you to be in the world but not of it? Surely it doesn't mean that we never sin. First John tells us if we think we have no sin, we are lying. I think it means that, like the leper, we have been healed by God's presence, we know that our world and our lives are gifts, and that we try to use those gifts, as Christ did, to bring healing and justice. It means that we give thanks and praise for them. In the world, but not of it. I believe it means that every day we are confronted with the choice of what will control our lives, the world or the love of Christ. In the world but not of it. With hearts and minds then, let us each new day seek to allow the power and love of Christ to fill and control our lives.