

MISSION WORK**Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; John 17:6-19**

In this passage from John, Jesus is praying. This isn't Jesus' last prayer, but it's the last one the disciples actually heard. You see, when Jesus prayed in agony from the Garden of Gethsemane, "Let this cup pass from me – yet not my will but your will be done," the disciples had fallen asleep; and when he cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" the disciples had forsaken him, fleeing in fear for their own safety. All of that makes Jesus' prayer in John 17 all the more poignant. The disciples had always wanted in on Jesus' prayer life: you couldn't miss his passionate intimacy with God, and they had said probably more than once, "Lord, teach us to pray." But in the shadows, on that last night after supper, Jesus wasn't teaching them to pray, but he was praying for them – right in front of them.

Aware that these are his final hours, Jesus admits to God, "I am no longer in this world, but they are." This must have dizzied the disciples with confusion, these dark hints, and they no doubt would have clung to him if they had really understood. His words underline a huge problem: Jesus is no longer in the world, but we are. An immense sadness hangs over the surviving disciples, and really over us, who probably feel on our own down here with Jesus not in this world. We wish Jesus' body were still on this earth – but then this very wish gets transformed into our vocation, our commissioning. Jesus' body is no longer here, but Jesus' body is very much here. We are the body of Christ. Teresa of Avila said, "Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out on a hurting world, yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good; yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

Jesus is praying for the disciples, as they are to be left to carry on the mission that God had sent Jesus to begin. Jesus asks God to bless them/us, to protect us from the evils of the world, and to keep of safe as we go forward. Now, I would remind you that whenever we are offered a blessing in the Bible, we might be tempted to run and hide – because a blessing never comes without a God-sized mission. And God-sized missions never come without a cost. God has expectations of us. God expects us to be about his work, his ministry, to and in the world.

Jesus also asks that the disciples be held together in unity, much like the Father and the Son are One. The reason that they are mirroring the union of the Father and Son and carrying the love of God and Jesus for them into the world that doesn't know God is precisely that God loves that world and wants it to know that love. Have you ever seen the face of a person who "gets it" who realizes for the first time, just how much God loves them? Have you ever had the joy of sharing the unconditional love of God with someone, and seen their reaction to that reality?

Just take a moment to revel in the fact that Jesus, all those years ago, was praying for us, for all of us who have believed because of the word that came down from the disciples across the generations and now has been shared with, and entrusted to, us. How does it feel to think of Jesus praying FOR YOU? Can you feel it? Can you imagine Jesus, as he pleads lovingly and longingly for followers who will create the new kind of servant community for which his

life was given into death? And, interestingly, the four requests he makes in this portion of what has come to be called the High Priestly Prayer, can easily be summarized in some well-known words of the Nicene Creed. Jesus prays that we might all be “one, holy, catholic and apostolic,” as we live out our mission on this earth.

The Greek word used in this passage is *apostelein*, which means to “send out.” The word “apostle” was assigned to Mark and Paul and Barnabas to designate their status as emissaries or ambassadors for Jesus. They were the sent ones! They didn’t stay at home and pray. They hit the road! Jesus had told their kind, early on, that there would be times, when those dusty sandals just had to be shaken clean, in the face of those who were inhospitable to them. However, through the years, fewer are sent out and more Christ-followers have become a sedentary Christianity. Couch-potato-do-gooders!

At some point it became for Christians to make a donation, buy “stock” for a youth event, pay for a new communion set, etc. Certainly it would be good for us if we found more active forms of stewardship—working on the church grounds, serving as a counselor at a retreat, canvassing the neighborhood, or delivering meals on wheels. However, our text is thinking of far more than that. They are being sent out to share the Good News in unknown lands. Jesus himself sends out his followers, and now he sends us too.

In our own time, some have become involved in bigger challenges than we ever dreamed possible for us. Recently, I heard of a woman going to work as a volunteer at a Christian mission in Palestine; another at an outpost in Kazakhstan. Some help conduct a VBS in the inner city. Others reach out by printing Braille Scriptures for the blind. Many are the ways in which we can be “sent ones,” apostles for the Lord, giving credence to fuller meaning for our Christian community. Some may consider it crazy when people pack up and head for Cambodia, as a husband and wife team I know recently did, but perhaps they just got tired of saying “I believe in one, holy, catholic and **apostolic** church,” and wanted the personal assurance that that last word, “apostolic,” really applied to them.

In his book, *"Canoeing the Mountains"* Tod Bolsinger asserts that the decline in mainline churches in the post – Christendom era of today, can only be turned around if churches embrace the call of God to mission work in our own communities. The majority of the people now claim "none" as their religious affiliation and those who attend church with any regularity are now the minority.

Four-year-old Jason, of Mobile, Alabama asked his father about the homeless men he saw on the side of the highway. As his father explained in simple terms about the homeless men, Jason, in his four-year-old simplicity said, "We need to feed them." Thus began the ministry of this little boy. Every day he makes bologna sandwiches (Jason's favorite) and takes them to the street where he hands them out to those in need. As he places the sandwich in the hands of the people who hunger and thirst, Jason says, "Now go show some love where you go." It is just that simple.

According to Bolsinger, we have a lot to do as we live out the mission to which Jesus calls all disciples. In this prayer, Jesus prays that we will answer the call, spread the Good News, and reclaim the world. Today Jesus calls you to move beyond these walls, in unity, as we

spread the Word of God's love, being in the world but not of the world. What can you do?
What have you done to answer the prayer of Jesus Christ? Amen.