

May 16, 2021 Easter 7B
Pearls and Sand
John 17:11-17

Today's Gospel is the middle section of a prayer that Jesus prayed shortly before his death. It has come to be known as His "High Priestly Prayer." In the first part of the prayer, he prays for himself. Then he prays for his disciples. Then he prays for those who will come to believe in him through the work of his disciples. We're looking at the middle section of the prayer. Jesus is praying for his disciples—and for us. He prays for our unity, for our joy, and for our safety and protection. Jesus says that we are not of the world, but that we should nonetheless remain in the world—for our ministry is to be in the world, and for the world.

As a way to get a grip on this, let's use the metaphor of oysters and pearls. Everybody knows that oysters sometimes make pearls; that little tidbit has been used to illustrate a lot of points. But you may have heard that old truth said in a new way a while back, a way that gives it more power. It seems pearls aren't automatic. When an oyster—who has an calm life lying around, eating soft, pleasant food—when an oyster somehow gets a piece of grit or a bit of sand inside its shell, then one of two things will happen: either the oyster will create a pearl or it will die. The pearl, a thing of beauty and value—is the oyster's way of staying alive after something very irritating has gotten past its shell and into its heart.

Take that little bit of marine biology as background, as we are offered a grain of sand, a bit of irritation, something small and rough that can maybe slip past our shells and give us something to work on. We—and indeed the church itself, in this and every generation—need to work on this bit of sand very carefully. It will not go away, and we will either make of it a pearl, or, in one way or another, we will die.

The grit (like the oyster's sand) is well hidden. The Gospel we just heard is a portion of what is called the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. The time is "the night in which he was betrayed." Jesus is praying for his disciples—and for us. He prays for our unity, for our joy, and for our safety and protection. Jesus says that we are not of the world, but that we should nonetheless remain in the world—for our ministry is to be in the world, and for the world.

(Sidebar—when Jesus says “world” here, He’s not talking about the created order—rocks and trees and bunnies and things like that; instead, he’s talking about human society organized as *it* sees best to promote its own purposes. Jesus is talking about business as usual; he is talking about the society, the culture, the various human institutions—the world in that sense—doing what it usually does.)

And Jesus says this about his disciples: that the world has hated them because they are not of the world. This hatred is to be the fate, indeed it is to be one real, distinguishing mark, of all who follow Jesus. Disciples are to stand out because they don’t really fit in.

The bit of grit for us oysters is this: When was the last time the world hated you because you belong to Jesus, and not to the world? When was the last time your faith so set you apart from business as usual that you were met with anger, ridicule, or hatred? How about a little bit of contempt? Mild dislike? How about a tiny bit of irritation? I don’t like that question, either. I don’t like it at all.

Hey, maybe Jesus was wrong; maybe, these days, we all *should* be of the world, and that’s the way it’s supposed to be. Maybe the Kingdom of God has arrived, and we just missed most everything about it, except for how convenient it is for us. But probably not.

From time to time, we need to ask whether we have become so totally caught up in our culture, become so totally *of* the world, that we have to work hard to discover if we are different, and how we are different, and what it might look like for us to be different, and whether it’s worth the effort, and the cost, to be different.

In many ways, it was easier for the Early Church. As a generally ignored and occasionally persecuted minority in a pagan culture, a lot of things were clear; there were some potent lists. For example: Christians couldn’t attend the public games; they couldn’t hold any of several types of jobs; they couldn’t join the army; they couldn’t expose unwanted children to the elements; and so on. Their culture, “the world”, often ridiculed them or made them scapegoats, and occasionally killed them, and both sides pretty much knew why.

It’s not so easy these days. And to make it even harder, modern attempts to come up with lists of popular things Christians can’t do have usually been rather silly. In fact, we Lutherans have been downright smug in

pointing out that we aren't like *those people* (you know who) who say you can't dance or wear make-up or go to movies or whatever. I went to a Southern Baptist high school where dancing, drinking and playing cards were all considered a sin. It is easy for me to be smug about my Lutheranness where beer, polka and playing cards are practically fellowship.

By the way, have you ever noticed that nobody ever really nails us on this? Instead of trying to establish God's disapproval for polka or beer or bingo, *those people* could really hit home if they responded to our self-righteous lack of lists with another question. What if they said, "O.K., have your beer and go to the dance—but before you do, tell me how your faith *does* affect your life; show me how it makes a difference"? That's the grit for us oysters. The truth is, we might be glad more folks haven't thought of that.

One way we try to get out of this pinch can cause just as much trouble. That way is saying that it's the Church's job to fix the world so there will be no conflicts between our faith and our culture for us to worry about. So, from time to time, we rear back and try to change everything within reach so we can be both righteous *and* of the world at the same time. Now, on one level, this is really, really good. We must engage the world, and we should try very hard to make things better—things like institutions, systems, people, and ourselves. We need to do this; our faith demands it. But we need to avoid getting confused about what that means. And we get confused easily.

It's sometimes easy to forget that God will bring in the Kingdom; we won't. And, even worse, we also find it very easy to begin supporting what we think is a good improvement in the world (for Christian reasons) but end up holding on to the improvement and forgetting the Christian part of it altogether. Of course, the best way to tell whether the cause or the Christianity is more important is by looking at how we treat people who don't agree with our improvement.

And we get confused when we forget that the Lord doesn't call us to be powerful or effective as the world sees power and effectiveness. The Lord calls us to be faithful—to live his life, to follow his steps. After all, of the twelve disciples, Judas was the most effective one at using both money and the powers-that-be to get what he wanted. So, trying to fix the world, while an important thing to do, isn't really the pearl we need.

And this sermon is about grit, not pearls. We *don't* have a list of rules telling us how *not* to be of the world, and that's not because we think this stuff is unimportant, it's because we know that things just aren't list-simple. Still, and at the same time, we do know, and we must never forget, that the way we treat each other, and the way we treat our bodies, and our time, and our money, and our promises and our planet—the way we treat all of the things we call “mine”—these are and will remain very important—and our Lord and his Church have some potent things to say about them. This side of the Kingdom, the world as Jesus spoke of it, the world as business as usual, this will always, in one way or another, be the alternative to faithfulness and not the means to it.

So, how do we do this? How do we live faithfully and honestly, rationally, prudently, and with integrity, in the midst of a world that is really quite far from the Kingdom? How do we do this without being trivial, without being silly, and without minimizing either the depth of the tension between the Gospel and the world or the importance of our response? You may have some ideas already. Taking this challenge seriously amounts to some of the most important pearl-making work the church has on its agenda. It's really the question of how we are to live.

And we need to make these pearls, or we will die. We need to look honestly at “the world”, the culture and institutions around us, and at who we are—and then pay careful attention to, and take concrete steps toward becoming, the person and the Church the Lord would have us be. We may even discover that Jesus was right, and that, in one way or another, the world will hate, or at least misunderstand, us. But the Lord continues to pray for us, we are promised all of the help we need, and these pearls come from the oddest places.