



BEING IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD  
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in Brookfield, Connecticut  
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Text: John 17 1-16

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 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.

You know how when you blow air across the top of an empty bottle, it makes a tone? That's the idea behind the image on the front of the bulletin this morning. *The Singing Ringing Tree*, as it's called, is a "wind powered sound sculpture," according to Wikipedia. It was completed in 2006, and it stands on a hillside overlooking the town of Burnley in Lancashire, England.

Here's what else Wikipedia says about it. *The Singing Ringing Tree* is a ten-foot-tall construction "comprising pipes of galvanized steel which harness the energy of the wind to produce a slightly discordant and penetrating choral sound covering a range of several octaves. Some of the pipes are primarily structural and visual elements, while others have been cut across their width enabling the sound. The harmonic and singing qualities of the tree were produced by tuning the pipes according to their length by adding holes to the underside of each."

So basically, it's a whole bunch of empty bottles stuck together, and it's not someone's breath making the tones, it's the wind. And what does that have to do with anything? Well, I think the *Singing Ringing Tree* is a good illustration of something Jesus talk alludes to the gospel reading this morning.

The setting is the Last Supper, the final meal Jesus eats with his disciples, and what we hear are his parting words before he gets up from the table and goes outside and makes his way to a place called Gethsemane, where the authorities come and place him under arrest. So this is a pivotal moment in the gospel, and you can hear the emotion in Jesus' voice. You can hear his concern as he prays for this little band of followers that he brought together and that very

soon, in a matter of hours, he's going to leave behind.

He's worried about them because he knows how difficult their lives are about to become. After he's gone, they're going to go on living in the world, like always, but they're not going to be of the world, if you get my meaning. They're not going to live the way everyone around them lives. They're going to live the way Jesus showed them. They're not going to hold fast to the values of the day. They're going to hold fast to the values Jesus embodied—values like concern for the weak and the vulnerable, disregard for social boundaries, love even for one's enemies, and allegiance to God above all. And since they're going to be carrying on where he left off and upholding everything he stood for, the disciples are going to run into the same resistance Jesus ran into. They're going to be looked at with the same suspicion, they're going to encounter the same hostility, and they may even face the same persecution.

But the promise here in this reading is that they'll have the strength to endure because they won't be alone. They'll have each other. They'll be a community, which is what Jesus prays for at the end. "Holy Father," he says, "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

So my question is, what might it look like for us today, in 21st century America, to be "in the world but not of the world"? Well, it would look a lot different than it did in the early days of the church, that's for sure. Back then, following the way of Jesus put you at odds with the Roman Empire. The Romans were not overly fond of people whose choices and actions proclaimed that their hearts belonged to God, not Caesar.

Today, living our faith in a way that's authentic and real won't get us thrown to the lions, but it often puts us out-of-step with our fast-paced, hyper-competitive, social-media-driven, next-day-delivery, consumer culture, which is constantly trying to claim us in all kinds of ways.

So imagine setting aside twenty minutes every morning to pray, no matter how busy we are, no matter how many appointments we have. We turn off our cell phones, we shut down our computers, and by doing so we proclaim: Our hearts belong to God, not the clock or the calendar.

Imagine having a whole day every week when we don't do anything but relax. We don't mow the lawn, we let the dishes pile up in the sink, and by doing so we proclaim: Our hearts belong to God, not the anxious need to be constantly busy.

Imagine giving a percentage of our grocery budget to a food pantry every month. Maybe that means we have to cut back on a few indulgences. Maybe we have to skip that pint of Ben and Jerry's or buy the eight-dollar bottle of wine instead of the twelve dollar bottle of wine. But by doing so we proclaim: Our hearts belong to God, not our cravings and appetites.

One time I read about a guy who cooks a gourmet dinner once a month for a soup kitchen in the town where he lives. He does all the work himself, he buys only the best ingredients, and he sets every table like a fancy restaurant: cloth napkins, white tablecloths, real silverware, and good china.

People often criticize him for being so extravagant. They say he's throwing money away. They tell him he could feed ten times as many people if he just made a big pot of macaroni and cheese. But for

him that's not the point. It's not about filling people's bellies. It's about feeding their souls. It's about making them feel human. It's about letting them know they're worth all the effort and all the expense. It's about proclaiming that his heart belongs to God, not hard-nosed practicality.

**B**eing in the world but not of the world. That's our calling as Christians, and we fulfill it every time we refuse to let anything but God claim us—even when doing so makes our lives difficult; even when we run into resistance; even when people snicker and scoff and tell us we're being impractical and wasteful and foolish.

And that brings me back to the *Singing Ringing Tree*.

The sound it makes isn't very musical. It's like a cacophony of voices, all speaking at once. But for me, that's part of the beauty—the way all those different tones, as you listen to them, somehow blend together and make a song that's actually very steady and soothing.

It reminds me of this church. Like any church, we're not musical all the time either. Our voices aren't always in tune, and sometimes our life together can be a little discordant. But somehow, we come together in this place and form a loving, welcoming community that gives each of us the strength and support we need to go on living our faith in a world that doesn't always make that easy.

The other part of the beauty is the tree's resilience. It gets pretty windy on that hillside where it stands, and there's nothing around to protect it. It's completely exposed. But in seventeen years, no wind has ever knocked it down.

If anything, the harder the wind blows, the louder the tree sings.

That also reminds me of this church. We've been blown by the wind many times—sometimes literally. But in 40 years, no wind has ever knocked us down. If anything, the harder the wind blows, the more we come together as one. And that's because our hearts belong to God, not microbursts or oil leaks or anything else the world can throw at us. Amen.