

**“Trinitarian Salvation, Trinitarian Mission,
Trinitarian Ownership”**
John 17:6-19
January 17, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We come again to the Gospel of John, and to the second section of Jesus’s prayer to God the Father immediately before his arrest.

With that in mind, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father ...

^{17:6}“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. ¹⁴I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, as we come to your Word,
we ask you to teach us the way of your statutes,
that we might keep it to the end.
Give us understanding, that we may follow your word
and observe it with our whole hearts.
Incline our hearts to your testimonies,
and not to our own selfish ends.
Turn our eyes and attention now from frivolous things,
and give us life through your word.
Grant this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:33-34, 36-37]

INTRODUCTION

Our text this morning is remarkably trinitarian. It focuses on the Father and the Son, but we need to remember that in the chapters that came before this Jesus spoke extensively about the Holy Spirit and how the Holy Spirit is involved in the ongoing work of God in the church.

And so Jesus here highlights the way that the triune God of the Bible is at work, the God who is one God in three persons, as we have already sung this morning.

Over and over again in this text Jesus speaks of the interactions between him and the Father – he speaks of how they work together, he speaks of the things they share together, he speaks in a variety of ways about their relationship. And then, in the second half of the text Jesus prays for his people, which we know from the previous chapters is a prayer about the work of the Holy Spirit.

And so the Christian doctrine of the trinity is woven throughout this text, and revealed in it. But what is especially interesting is *how* the trinity is revealed.

Jesus does not here give us a philosophical lesson on the ontological trinity. He doesn't describe the trinity in static or abstract terms. But instead he speaks of the active trinity. The three persons in the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who are, of course, united in nature – are presented here as also being united in purpose – in three purposes, in fact, in which they all participate. They are active in the salvation of God's people, in the mission of God's people, and in the identity of God's people.

And so, rather than stepping back for an abstract lesson on the trinity this morning – as interesting as that would be – I want to focus on what Jesus tells us here the triune God is seeking to do in us ... and I want to consider how we tend to resist it.

The trinity is at work in our salvation. The trinity is at work in our mission. And the trinity is at work in our identity, in our understanding of who we are ... or, more accurately *whose* we are.

Those are three ways that the trinity is at work here. And they are also three areas in which we all tend to resist the trinity in our day-to-day lives.

And so this morning we will consider each of these areas, and how we are called, in each one, not just to profess the triune God with our lips, but to cooperate with him in our lives.

WE RESIST TRINITARIAN SALVATION

So, first, I want to consider how we might resist the salvation of the triune God. And specifically, I want to think about how we might embrace the idea of mission – which is so central to our passage this morning – but at the same time we might resist the salvation that God offers us here.

And that connection between salvation and mission is an interesting one to consider.

Because more and more, we are a people who long for mission.

We live in the most individualistic culture in human history. No other culture has emphasized the priority of the individual more than ours, from Baby Boomers, to Gen X, to Millennials, to Gen Z. And yet as that individualism is emphasized, more and more people are finding themselves dissatisfied with it.

Fleet Foxes is a somewhat well-known American indie folk band from Seattle, made up mostly of millennials, along with a couple younger Gen Xers. In other words, they are from a region and from two generations that especially grew up with this heightened individualism.

In their song “Helplessness Blues,” they sing these words:

I was raised up believing I was somehow unique,
Like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes,
Unique in each way you can see.
And now after some thinking, I'd say I'd rather be
A functioning cog in some great machinery,
Serving something beyond me;
But I don't, I don't know what that will be.
I'll get back to you someday soon, you will see.

Fleet Foxes there captures a sense that is growing more and more obvious around us. People are not content to simply live for themselves. People want to serve something bigger than themselves. People want a mission.

And we see that playing out in a variety of ways. We see it in the ways more and more people around us are drawn to enthusiastically joining a political mission, whether that mission is social justice, or national populism; whether it is the democratic socialism of Bernie Sanders or the America-First-ism of Donald Trump; or whether it is Antifa, white nationalism, or QAnon.

But this longing for a larger mission is in no way limited to the political sphere. We see it also in the realm of work.

There have been a number of articles written in the past few years on the difficulties companies are having recruiting younger workers. And one reason for this is that many younger workers are not satisfied with just an engaging and well-paying job. They want something more. They want a sense that their company is serving some greater mission to improve the world – a mission that they are then a part of.

We see it even in our consumption. Companies today frantically seek to identify themselves with various social and moral causes, often linking the purchase of their products to financial support for various works of charity or activism. Even when they are simply buying shoes, or eyeglasses, or even a cup of coffee, people want to believe that they are also contributing to some greater mission in the world.

And we could go on. Charles Taylor gets at this when he argues that our culture is not so much characterized by moral rigor in some and moral laxity in others, as it is by competing moralities ... and really, we could say, by competing moral crusades, with different moral missions that are at war with one another.

In so many people we see the desire to serve a larger mission – to work for a greater good.

Which is exactly what Jesus offers here. He offers for us to be part of something bigger – part of something greater than ourselves. In fact, he offers a mission that should be superior to all worldly missions: He offers for us to be part of the mission of the triune God, the maker of heaven and earth, as God seeks to save people not only from temporal troubles – not only from worldly struggles – but from eternal death and destruction.

What mission could be greater than that? Shouldn't a culture longing for mission be clamoring to join in the mission that Jesus offers?

And yet ... we're not. Non-Christians seek mission elsewhere ... and many Christians, even if they are true believers, they tend to find their greatest sense of purpose and mission not in the mission that Jesus describes here ... but in some other worldly mission: in their job, or their lifestyle, or their activism, or their politics.

Why is there such lack of interest today in the mission of Jesus?

Well ... there are a few reasons, I think. But chief among them is that most of us would prefer a mission that is not tied to the kind of salvation Jesus offers here.

Most of us want mission without the trinitarian salvation that Jesus describes here. Because most of us want to be part of a mission in which we can assert that we are superior to our adversaries.

Most of us want to be part of a mission in which we can assert that we are superior to our adversaries. But the salvation Jesus offers here stands in direct contradiction to that. Jesus offers salvation that is grounded in the confession that those who receive it are no better than those who don't, but instead they receive what they receive out of sheer grace.

First, Jesus points out that those who now follow him came themselves out of the world. That's what he says in verse six. They boast no better origin, but they themselves were once part of the broader human culture that lives in rebellion against its Maker.

But then he goes farther than that. Because not only were his followers once themselves rebels, but their deliverance from that state of rebellion was not even their own doing. They did not lift themselves up out of the world by their bootstraps, but they were given to Jesus, as Jesus says in verse six, and he was the one who saved them, through his mercy – through his death on the cross for them. Jesus brought them out of the world by grace.

And then, lest his people find solace in the idea that at least they wanted that salvation when others didn't, Jesus emphasizes the fact that this salvation came to them not because they sought it or even asked for it, but it came because the Father chose them long before they would ever choose him.

There is no room for boasting in Jesus's salvation. There are no grounds for asserting our superiority to others. Which is one reason why so many of us are uninterested in either his salvation, or the mission that is linked to it.

Of course worldly missions can be good – they can be very important. They can grow out of our commitment to Jesus’s mission. I’m not talking about that though.

I’m talking about how we prioritize our missions in life. And often, we value worldly missions in our lives more than we value the trinitarian mission of God’s work in the world. And the reason for that, is that those worldly missions are rooted in a conviction that we are better than other people. But Jesus here, in rooting the trinitarian mission in the trinitarian salvation, calls us to a mission that is rooted in a confession that we are *not* better than others.

And at that point, many of us lose interest.

So, one tendency we see in us and around us, is a desire for mission, but a resistance to Jesus’s salvation. We do not want trinitarian salvation to be central and foundational to our mission or our lives, because it means giving up our sense of superiority.

Where do you see that resistance in your life? Where do you see that resistance in your heart? What worldly missions shape your sense of purpose *more* than the mission of Jesus?

Jesus calls you this morning to repent. Jesus calls you this morning to embrace his salvation, received by grace, and not of your own merit, as the foundation for your life.

Resisting that salvation is the first way we might resist the work of the trinity described in our text this morning.

WE RESIST THE TRINITARIAN MISSION

The second way we might resist the work of the trinity is by resisting the trinitarian mission itself.

Because, while some people want a mission, but not salvation by grace, others are happy to receive the gift of salvation, but resistant towards the mission that comes with it.

And this can take a few different forms.

One form is compartmentalization. We compartmentalize our faith. We make our faith about our hearts, but not our external lives. We make our faith about Sundays, but not Mondays through Saturdays. We make our faith about some of our relationships, but not other relationships. And as we separate out areas of our lives, while we are happy to receive the salvation Jesus offers here, we soon find no place for his call to go into the world as his agents. After all, our relationship with him is separate from our life in the world. It doesn’t affect how we live in the world, or what our goals are in the world. It doesn’t compel us to share our faith out in the world.

Do you tend to divide your life that way? Do you tend to put your salvation in one compartment of your life, and your activity in the world in another compartment, so that the mission of God has no real place in how you live your life?

Jesus’s words here make it clear that this kind of split in our lives is not an option. The salvation of God and the mission of God are not two disconnected things. They are not items on a menu, where you can choose one and decline the other. They go together. Jesus says in verse eighteen

that he is sending his people out into the world as part of his mission. It's not an option, it's a command. We cannot compartmentalize our faith.

Compartmentalizing our faith is a way of resisting God's call on our lives that conservative Christians have decried for years.

And yet ... in recent years many conservative Christians have come up with their own way to resist God's call themselves.

Instead of separating our faith from our lives in the world, they have sought to separate our lives from the world.

In 2019 New York State passed a law expanding abortion options beyond 24 weeks of pregnancy. Christians and pro-life activists decried the bill. Their distress was understandable and I shared it.

But in the range of responses that came, I was struck by one in particular. In light of this bill becoming law, one Christian I knew made the argument that New York had gone so far that faithful Christians should just flee the state.

The idea underlying that claim was that even if a culture wasn't requiring their Christian citizens to sin, or sinning directly against Christian citizens in that culture, if the culture itself became godless enough, Christians should leave it.

Now, the logic of that is problematic. But for me, the argument was upsetting on a much more personal level.

I'm from New York. I went to college in New York City. I know numerous faithful Christian congregations in New York State and New York City who are seeking not only to live faithful Christian lives themselves, but to be agents of God's mission there. By their efforts, people – formerly secular people – were coming to know the Lord. And by their efforts, pregnant women in crisis were receiving help and viable alternative options to abortion. Through their lives of faith the mission of the kingdom of God is advancing in New York in many ways.

How then, could Christians outside New York claim that it'd be better if those Christians in New York just left for somewhere where there was actually less kingdom work to be done?

And yet, that kind of thinking is not hard to come by.

While he doesn't advocate for it, in his recent book David French documents how Americans are already sorting themselves geographically across our country, and then he sketches out possible futures in which he thinks it will become even more common for conservative Christians to leave more secular parts of the country in order to live in regions that are more friendly to their faith.

And yet, geographical withdrawal is actually not the most common form of withdrawal. Far more often Christians today are withdrawing from the world socially, while staying, geographically, in the same place.

This social and cultural withdrawal was popularized in 2017 by Rod Dreher, in his book *The Benedict Option*.

In many ways Dreher's assessment of our post-Christian culture is insightful and accurate. What is more perplexing is his prescription.

Dreher argues that since our culture has rejected Christianity to such an extent, the best step for Christians now to take is "strategic withdrawal" from the world. That "strategic withdrawal" is how Dreher defines what he calls the Benedict Option, named after the retreat of Saint Benedict and his followers out of the world and into the cloisters. [Dreher, 2]

The thinking goes that Christians should withdraw from the world, form their own separate communities, their own separate subcultures, their own separate institutions, and put their energy and focus into developing and strengthening these cloistered communities, to preserve the faith, so that a later generation can then bring the gospel to the world, when the world will be more receptive to it.

This approach can be appealing. There is a logic to it. And many Christians who have never heard of Dreher or of the Benedict Option have instinctually ordered their lives around the same pattern.

The thing I've never been able to wrap my head around is how these conservative Christians get around the direct command of Jesus.

I mean, if we think about the early church ... humanly speaking, if there was ever a time where the Church should withdraw from mission to focus instead on developing its own institutions, and its own intellectual community, and its own sub-culture, then the early church would seem to be that time. The world of the first-century was brutal. The antagonism from both the Jewish world and the pagan world was intense and often violent. The institutional resources of the church were thin at best.

And yet, it was to those first disciples – and with them all of his disciples who would follow – but it was to those first disciples that Jesus said: "Go" and "make disciples of all nations."

Jesus refused to put the mission on the backburner. Jesus refused to postpone his mission until the disciples felt the culture was more friendly to them. Jesus sent them out right then and there. That was his order. And he hasn't rescinded it.

Because as important as it is to cultivate the gifts of the church ... the power of the gospel – the mission of God – is not reliant ultimately on our human resources, but on the power of God himself.

Jesus has sent us. Who are we to refuse his order?

And yet ... do you see this tendency to withdrawal in your own life? Do you see the desire in your heart to separate completely from the unbelieving world? Do you see ways that you're doing it already?

Jesus here is praying for his people. He prays for them in a number of ways. But at the same time, as if to preempt misunderstanding, and in a way that is almost kind of awkward, he also specifies what he is *not* praying for. He is praying that his people would be guarded. He is praying that his people will keep the word he has given to them. He is praying that they would be kept from the

evil one. But he also clarifies what he is not praying for in verse fifteen. There he says of his people to God the Father, in no uncertain terms: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world.”

“I do not ask that you take them out of the world.”

Jesus wants his people guarded from the unbelieving world. But he does not want them withdrawn from the unbelieving world.

At least not yet.

It’s not wrong for us to long to be free of the opposition and the temptation of an unbelieving world. And, in fact, when Jesus returns, he says he will separate his people from those who would tempt them or hate them. But not before then. In fact, Jesus goes so far as to say that he will *not* be praying for that separation to happen before that time.

Have you ever had someone tell you they won’t pray for something you want?

It’s kind of a rebuke.

And Jesus says here to those who might want that separation from the world before its proper time that he will *not* pray to the Father for that.

We are not to be like the world. But we’re not to leave it either. For that is where our mission is.

And the early church took that to heart.

In First Corinthians 5 the apostle Paul makes that clear. There he writes to the church in Corinth:

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

To Paul, it is self-evident that he was not advocating withdrawal from the unbelieving world.

We each have some role in the mission of God. It might be big – it might be a call to do something that will yield great results for the kingdom that we ourselves will get to see. Or it might be small by worldly standards – it might simply be our faithful presence in an unbelieving world: living faithfully, loving faithfully, dying faithfully, so that our good works will point to our God. In many ways we cannot control the shape or scope of what God will call us to. But we cannot refuse the call.

Now, of course, as we say that, we should be clear about what we are *not* saying in all this.

For one thing we are *not* saying that there are not times when it is appropriate for Christians to withdraw or even to flee from persecution.

The Bible contains many examples of faithful believers fleeing danger, including early Christians who fled Jerusalem, and the Apostle Paul who fled from those who sought his life. Jesus himself told his disciples to flee towns that persecuted them. [Matthew 10:23] And we, of course, continue today to pray for and to seek the protection for Christian refugees who flee persecution and danger.

But there is a difference between fleeing real danger on the one hand and fleeing mere difficulty or discomfort on the other. There is a difference between fleeing from martyrdom and fleeing from hate. Jesus says in verse fourteen that so long as we hold to his word, the world will hate us. How can we flee from that?

Second, we are not saying that Christians are to be passive in the face of worldly opposition, or to forsake the legal, political, and practical protections available to them. The Apostle Paul by no means shirked the mission of God, and he was also happy to take advantage of the legal, political, and other practical forms of protection available to him. He sought protection within a hostile world. But he did not seek to withdraw from that hostile world.

Third, we are not saying that Christians are called to leave their communities overexposed. There are places where we should be cultivating healthy institutions to disciple the people of God, and that means some level of separation. That is the logic behind much of the life of the church. It is the logic behind Christian education and other Christian associations. But part of the purpose of such institutions, such ministries, and such subcultures is to then send Christians back out into the unbelieving world, as part of the mission of God. If we do one of those things without the other, we have lost sight of our calling as God's people.

We are called to be wise. But we are not called to adopt worldly wisdom in a way that shrinks back from our calling. The people of God are called to live their lives as part of the mission of God.

WE RESIST *WHOSE* WE ARE IN THE TRINITARIAN SALVATION & MISSION

So we may resist the trinitarian salvation that Jesus describes here. We may resist the trinitarian mission that Jesus prays for here.

But third, and finally, we might resist the trinitarian identity given to the people of God here. Or, to put it more directly: we might resist *whose* Jesus says we are here.

Because we shouldn't miss the fact that there is a lot of possessive language here. There is a lot of language of ownership.

We might want salvation. We might long for mission.

But even with those desires – even with them burning in our hearts – we also, at the same time, often want to maintain autonomy of ourselves.

That means that when it comes to salvation, we want to choose the terms. And we'd prefer to be rescued, released, and left alone. But that is not how salvation works. For being left to ourselves is exactly what led to our problems in the first place.

When it comes to mission, we would like to choose the terms. We'd like a say in the goals. And we'd like to get to pick the means available to us as we pursue those goals. We somehow both want to give ourselves to something bigger than we are, while we also want to maintain our own individual autonomy above all else. Which is of course impossible.

And even if it was, Jesus will have none of it.

God's people in this passage are described as just that: *God's*. *He* possesses them. *He* owns them. They are *his*.

They belong to God the Father, Jesus tells us in verse six, and the Father could do with them as he willed. He decided to give them to the Son, and now they belong to Jesus, as we read in verses six and ten. That means, among other things, that they do not belong to themselves.

What Jesus states in passing here, the Apostle Paul will highlight later on, when he tells the Christians in Corinth: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price." [1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a] If you are one of God's people, then Jesus has bought you – he has purchased you with his blood – and now you belong to him.

This is the heart of Christian salvation. You cannot have salvation unless the Lord has bought you. And if the Lord has bought you, then you are his.

And that should shape your identity. It also means, that he gets to decide what happens to you next. Because we are his, *he* gets to decide our mission. *He* gets to decide our goals. *He* gets to decide the means that are to be employed in pursuing those goals.

And he tells us our calling in verse eighteen: we are sent into the world, just as Jesus was. We are agents of his mission, serving his goal, in his ways.

And the truth is that many of us, Christians and non-Christians alike, don't like that so much.

After all, Jesus's mission is one of love – and love is hard. A lot of times, we don't want to love other people.

And the means of his mission are self-sacrifice, and we like self-sacrifice even less. We don't like dying to ourselves, because it often feels like dying.

But if Jesus saved us, then we are his.

You can choose instead to belong yourself. But there is no salvation in that. There is only eternal self-centeredness. Eternal emptiness. What the Bible calls eternal damnation.

You can choose to belong to yourself. But there is no mission in that. Only eternal dedication to your own desires above all else. Eternal isolation. Eternal purposelessness. What the Bible calls eternal hell.

Instead, Jesus calls us to embrace the trinitarian salvation, mission, and identity that he describes here.

He calls us to embrace a salvation by grace, not rooted in our own merit, but in his mercy.

He calls us to embrace his mission, to go into an unbelieving world that will hate us, just as it hated him, not for our own gain, but out of sacrificial love, just as he did for us. He calls us to wage war

not with the weapons of this world, but with the proclamation of the gospel in word and deed, so that more will come to know him and receive the same salvation that we have.

Finally, Jesus calls us not to resist, but to delight in the reality that we are not our own, but we belong to him. He calls us to see the truth that perfect freedom and purpose lies not in our autonomy, not in our self-determination, but in the fact that we are his – for he has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him. For it is knowing that Christ is Lord, and knowing that we belong to him, that Jesus says, in verse thirteen, will bring us true joy.

That is what Jesus calls us to here.

Each one of us here, in some way, in some area of life, is resisting that. As Jesus points out in verse fifteen, we are each tempted in some area to follow the way of the evil one – the prime example of one who rejected God’s mission and lordship for his life.

But Jesus, our King, our Lord, our Elder Brother, has prayed for us. He has prayed for me. He has prayed for you. He has prayed that the Father would keep us in his care.

And so, let us take comfort in his care for us. And then, let us seek the same thing for ourselves: let us cling to his salvation, let us rejoice that we belong to him, and then let us live our lives according to his mission.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According to John*. PNTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.

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