

## BELONGING FOR OTHERS

1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

Last month I visited Meteora in central Greece. Meteora is an area of dramatic rock outcroppings that tower over the plains of Thessaly. Centuries ago monks built monasteries on top of the rocks, places where they could be inaccessible to the world below and live together in communities that devoted themselves to work and prayer. For hundreds of years, the only way to get there was for the monks to haul you up the sheer cliffs, hundreds of meters high, in baskets attached to rope pulleys. It's only in the last sixty years that some of them have been accessible by road.

Each of the monasteries has a chapel that is richly adorned with art. Inside the chapels the walls are painted with illustrations of biblical scenes, saints, and patrons of the monastery. What really made an impression on me, though, were the frescoes on walls of the narthexes, or vestibules. Those rooms outside the main worship areas are where people who did not belong to the church would sit and overhear the service going on inside. From floor to ceiling, and across the ceiling, the narthexes are covered with depictions of Christian martyrs being put to death. The scenes are gruesome. There are people being beheaded, having their arms or their breasts cut off, burned at the stake, some are even being skinned alive. What an introduction to the faith for those who don't believe. Pictures of Christians being boiled in oil are not exactly what modern church growth specialists would recommend you emphasize to attract people to church. Come join with us! Torture and death await you!

You have to commend those monks, though, for not sugar-coating the faith. There are times when Christians suffer terribly for what we believe. And even when believers aren't being persecuted, those frescoes tell something about the community that gathers there for worship. They are part of an ongoing lineage that includes martyrs who suffered and died at the hands of those who hated them because of their faith.

Christians are still persecuted in many parts of the world. Churches have been burned in Nigeria. Congregations have been attacked in Pakistan. Bibles and worship services are prohibited in Saudi Arabia. IPC is well aware of the dangers that Christians face around the world, and you have included in your mission support several ministries that work with persecuted believers.

I'm sure that Jesus had those persecuted believers in mind when he prayed to God that night before his crucifixion and asked God to protect his disciples whom he was sending out into the world. He knew that many of them faced what he was going to endure the next day. Some would literally have to take up their cross. He prayed that God would protect them so they might be one even as he and the Father are one.

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That unity would be crucial for them to endure what was ahead. Soldiers who have been in combat say that they may believe in the cause they are fighting for, but in the heat of battle, it's their comrades for whom they would throw themselves on a live grenade. It's the band of brothers with whom they've eaten, shared hardships and come to love that in the moment they fight to protect.

Which raises the question, What does that have to do with us? The threat to Christians in the West isn't so much persecution as indifference. Now, don't get me wrong. Many of us have experienced discrimination because we belong to Jesus. We can share stories of times that we've been scoffed at for our faith or excluded from a group. There are definitely times when following Jesus can put us at a disadvantage, perhaps when our employers or our peers expect us to do something that goes against what we know is right. It's tempting sometimes to draw in on ourselves and find strength in the identity of a persecuted minority, but whatever we suffer for our faith in Switzerland is in a different category from what is depicted on the walls of the monasteries of Meteora or the lives of those we support whose lives are threatened because of their faith.

One of the things about the gospel of John that challenges me is its emphasis on how Jesus' followers are set apart from the world. John 3:16 says that Jesus came into the world because God so loved the world that he gave his only son, but in this prayer that we read today Jesus says to God, "I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me." John emphasizes that there is a distinction between the world and those who follow Jesus. Jesus prays that God protect his followers from the world.

And yet there are other places in the Bible where Jesus emphasizes that his followers must reach out and bring in those who do not belong to him. He tells them to go into the highways and byways and bring in whomever they can find. He especially charges them to seek out the despised and rejected like Samaritans and lepers. In the gospel according to Luke, the emphasis is not so much on protecting and strengthening the community of faith, but broadening it and becoming more involved in the world.

So which is it? Do we Christians pull in on ourselves and set ourselves apart from the world, or do we go out to engage the world and give ourselves to it? Well, it's both. IPC's Vision Statement that's printed on the back of the bulletin captures that dynamic of the Christian life. IPC's vision is "Growing Together and Reaching Out in Christ." It's an inward focus and an outward focus. You can't have one without the other. It's like breathing. You can't choose whether it's better to inhale or to exhale. You have to do both.

The psychiatrist W.D. Winnicott was sitting a park one day and observed that the children would play boldly on the swings and the monkey bars, but every once in a while, each child would

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scurry over to his or her mother. Maybe it was to wipe a runny nose or get a kiss for a bruise or just for a quick hug. After that brief connection with the mother, the child would run back to her or his playmates and carry on with play. That led Winnicott to observe the need for what he called holding objects. It's something that is obvious among children on the playground, but it's something we need throughout life. We need grounding in something solid and reliable, a place where we can feel safe and renewed, in order to go out into the world and thrive.

That's why families are so important for a healthy, flourishing life. Families provide a place where we can find strength and support, a place we belong. In order to provide that kind of support, there is something exclusive about a family. It can't include everyone. Being part of a family means that you are treated differently from others.

The late Haddon Robinson, a renowned preacher, told about the first time he met his future wife's parents. He and his fiancée travelled to her hometown, went to her parents' house, and when her mother opened the door, his fiancée said, "Mother, this is Haddon." She gave him a big hug and said, "Come in, come in. We've so been looking forward to meeting you. You must be starving. Let me show you into the kitchen." She opened the refrigerator, and took out some of the delicious dishes she'd prepared. She told him, "Now you know where the kitchen is. Help yourself to anything that's here. I know you must be tired after your long trip. We've prepared the best room in the house for you. It's in down in the basement. Let me show you." So she took him downstairs and showed him his room, with its own bath and a large comfortable bed. He was feeling great. He hadn't even been there an hour and already he had the run of the kitchen and the best room in the house. He lay down, and after he'd been resting for a little while there was a knock on the door. It was his fiancée's father. "Haddon," he said, "I'm so happy to meet you. I hope you're comfortable. Look, I know that you and my daughter have lots of things to do, so here are the keys to the car. Help yourself to it whenever you want." He hadn't even been there two hours, and already he had the run of the kitchen, the best room in the house, and the keys to the car.

But then he wonders, What if he had not known their daughter. What if he had just walked up off the street, knocked on the door and said, "Hi, I'm Haddon Robinson." He was sure that his mother in law would have been polite. She would have said, "Yes, can I help you?" "Sure. I'd like something to eat." Kind woman that she was, she probably would have taken him into the kitchen and given him a sandwich. Then if he'd said, "Can I have a place to sleep," that's when she would have gone into the back room and called the police to help him find the homeless shelter.

We do treat family differently. That doesn't mean that we are indifferent to others, but it does mean that we need a place that we can call home, a community where we find strength in the love and support that binds us together in a special way. Jesus is the one who brings us in to

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the family of faith. He is the one who opens up to us the riches of the heavenly Parent who welcomes us into the household.

Like any family, the family of faith has to work on staying connected. Family support isn't something that exists in the abstract. It takes concrete forms. We make a point of getting together with those we love whenever we can to share our joys and sorrows, to encourage each other, and to listen. If we can't get together, we write or email or Skype. We pray for each other. IPC does a good job of keeping this church family connected and strong. The home group ministry provides a place where people can come together in caring and supportive ways. Bonding and friendship takes place in Bible study and on hikes, serving on committees and touching base at coffee fellowship. And when that church family is functioning well, when it reflects the unity and the joy for which Jesus prayed in the upper room, we do the work of reaching out into the world for Christ.

The reason I was in Greece last month was for the annual meeting of the Association of International Churches in Europe and the Middle East. It's a network of congregations like IPC that serve an international English speaking community. Every year the pastors of those churches gather for a week of sharing, worship and learning. This year the gathering concluded with dinner at a very nice restaurant in the heart of Athens. An old mansion has been lovingly converted into a space that was tastefully decorated with original artwork and creative design. The food was gourmet, and the service excellent. Our group of 45 were the only ones there that night. The spirit of the evening reflected the bonds that had been formed over the previous week. There was joy and laughter and encouragement. As I was leaving I thanked the owner. He told me that that evening was the best in the 12 years the restaurant had been open. There was a sense of joy that pervaded the group, and they had shown their appreciation to the staff that served them.

The organizer of the event was James Bultema who has served at the international church in Antalya, Turkey. IPC has supported his work with persecuted Christians in the Middle East, and he has spoken here. After we all returned home, James sent around an email telling us that after our dinner the owner of the restaurant asked if he could walk with James back to the hotel. He told James what he had told me, that it had been the best night at his restaurant since it opened. He asked James what it was that made the group different. Was it the fact that we were all Protestants? James explained that what makes the difference, no matter what branch of the church, is that we belong to Jesus. Through him we have the power of the Holy Spirit flowing among us. Belonging to Jesus gives us strength and joy and peace which the world can see in our life together. James was writing to ask us to keep the owner of that restaurant in our prayers, that he would respond to what he had seen among that group by renewing his relationship with Christ.

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In that community of believers who gathered in his restaurant, the owner saw what Jesus has in store for him.

Last weekend the IPC council and deacons took a retreat to spend time reflecting on how to strengthen the ministry of the church as you prepare to enter a new era under the leadership of your new pastor. The council adopted three goals for the next three to six months that reflect that dynamic of looking inward and looking outward, of building up the community of faith so it can serve the community of the world. The first goal is to develop a plan to strengthen the Christian education and spiritual formation of families in the church, providing opportunities for children and parents to grow together in their relationship with Christ. The second goal is to develop a plan so that those who have been on this journey of life with Christ can serve as mentors to those who are just getting started, to find ways that the rich experiences of our more experienced members can enrich the lives of younger people. And the third goal is to involve more members in meeting community needs and outreach beyond the church. The goals bring us in and send us out, strengthen the family of faith so we can go out and make a difference in Zurich and the world.

Jesus calls us out of the world into this community of faith so we can find strength and courage to be in the world, the world that he loves so much that he gave his life to bring it back to God. Because we belong to God, we belong to each other, and together we show the world its savior.