

Gloria Dei Sermon
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Our family was headed that August of 1986 to Montana to see an uncle and aunt. We were cruising in our full-sized van, complete with captain seats, a bench that transformed into a double bed, complete with a small refrigerator. We were in the 1980's family heaven. We had just crossed the state line from Nebraska into South Dakota. This wasn't Lutheran South Dakota. This was the South Dakota of Wounded Knee, Rapid City, Mount Rushmore, the Needles, Spearfish and the Passion Play. In my rearview mirror I spotted a strange-looking something fast approaching the considerable rear of the van. In no time at all, a hog with a front wheel at least ten feet in front of the driver passed us like we were standing still. And hanging on to the driver's considerable girth was a woman with hair flying as she shoved her face onto the bulky braided hair of the driver. Both were dressed in leather chaps and over-sized T-shirts.

I commented to the family, "Wow, who would have thought we would see something like that out here?" The next day as we left the Rapid City area, we were surrounded by a sea of motorcycles, thousands of them. Our then eight-year-old son thought he had died and gone to heaven. We got off the interstate at a little town called Sturgis and the Lindal family was smack in the middle of the Annual Sturgis Harley Davidson Bike Rally. Being on the cutting edge of all things cultural, I, of course, had never heard of Sturgis. And I certainly had not planned our annual family vacation to coincide with this event, but we were there. Biker Papas and Mamas of all ages and stations were present. There were mini caravans and campers and three wheelers and side riders. There were Grandpas and Grandmas who had gladly fled rocking chairs and fishing poles to hit the road. And there was one father of a family of five who wondered, "How in the blue blazes do I get back to the interstate?"

Now you need to know that Harley Davidson hasn't always had this kind of success or appeal. Although Harleys were the cycle of choice for rebels and outlaw bikers, the company chose to distance itself from this antiestablishment image. But later, as the Japanese imports flooded the market, Harley Davidson stumbled, close to bankruptcy. It was well into the 1980's before the company leadership embraced the hard-core biker group that was showing incredible brand loyalty. To ward off the invasion of the Japanese crotch rockets, Harley made a final, desperate bid for survival by focusing on the its legendary connection with bikers.

The strategy worked. Harley saved itself by embracing an outlaw image. Hog riders and cycle lovers want to see themselves as part of another world, and no matter the role they play 9-to-5- as lawyers, accountants, realtors and business leaders- they feel unashamed and unabashed as they strap on their leathers and rumble off to Sturgis, South Dakota. Last year's bike rally in the Black Hills drew a pretty good crowd, but not a great one. The total count was only about a quarter of a million people. The bottom line? At the souls of a Harley is an outlaw attitude that is positively otherworldly. To be a true Harley Davidson rider, you've got to put hope of hog heaven above everything else.

There is a message for us here, whether we are bike buffs or not, Jesus, in his great High Priestly Prayer of John 17, hopes his disciples will be willing to be, of another world, to strap on the clothing of a countercultural spiritual life. Herein lies the problem. Although we are called to a radical Christianity that proclaims God's love in the midst of all of life, that announces that God is to be in the marketplace, in our homes, and in the energy and life-giving exchange of friendships, many of us practice a pastel Christianity that has lost sight of its original vision. We've become an interesting group of weekend riders rather than the gang of citizens of the Kingdom Jesus refers to in the prayer of our text. Our primary identity is an outlaw identity- outside the law, that is, and inside God's grace.

Now you need to know that true riders have little time for the new breed of bikers. The purists know that the bogus riders are not for real; they're wannabees. True bikers are usually under the

influence of testosterone. They've got hairy armpits, braided ponytails and bad breath. The guys are even worse. And they can spot phonies. Signs of phony wannabees are: their leathers still have creases, their tattoos wash off, they buy bikes as investments, their Harley shirts have collars, they don't ride in the rain, they think that some motorcycles are too loud, they need a biker lingo book, they stop thirty miles from Sturgis and unload their bikes so they can ride in, they're scared by real bikers and their saddlebags have a special pocket for their cell phones. The church is in big trouble unless it returns to its radical roots. On our journey Godward, we've got to strap on the clothing to live in the Kingdom- a rebel getup that the apostle Paul describes elsewhere as "the whole armor of God." A belt of truth around the waist, a breastplate of righteousness, a shield of faith and a helmet of salvation (Ephesians 6:10-17) The early history of the church is nothing if not a gallery of outlaw Christians ready to roll: Paul, Peter, James, John, Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin, Cyprian, Tertullian, Anthony, Athanasius, Augustine.

In the gospel of John, Jesus' prayer in 17:6-19 is a portion of his final prayer before his crucifixion. Although often considered a prayer for unity, the emphasis is actually on protection. As he becomes acutely conscious of his imminent departure from this world, Jesus prays that God will protect his disciples as they spread the countercultural message of the gospel. They will need this protection because they, as followers of the Messiah who is not of this world, will also lack the protection the forces of this world provide. Their protection rests in God and the power of another world.

The climax of the prayer occurs in 11b: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." Several strands of tradition in John's gospel converge to make this half verse the very kernel of John's understanding of God. Although kinship terminology for the divine-human relationship can be found in ancient Semitic religions, "Father" is not a name of God in the Hebrew Bible. Although it was not unknown in Jesus' time to address God as "Father," such language was found only in apocryphal and rabbinical writings. "Holy Father" is a unique address to God found only here in this prayer.

"Protect" (GK *tereson*) is the point of Jesus' prayer and is a frequent idea in the gospel of John, the word occurs far more frequently in John's gospel, in fact, than in any other NT book. John, being the last of the gospels to be written, is formed in a time when the early church is already surrounded by hostile forces. When Jesus invokes God's name to protect his followers, it reflects the complex understanding of the power and significance of names that was widespread throughout the ancient world. Jesus was not wanting his followers to experience God's protection in the form of power, but he desired them to be empowered from within, to be transformed by the presence of the living God. In this way they would be able to endure persecution. This gospel was given shape while the blood of the martyrs was already flowing.

Jesus' final word for us today is that we would be sanctified. The word for "sanctify" in verse 17 is the same word for "hallow" in the Lord's Prayer. In both instances, the basic meaning is something set apart from common or profane use. We are set apart for the work of the Kingdom- God's reign within your life and mine. The poor, the disdained, the sick, the rejected, will not be ignored. That is what the Kingdom is all about. We will be people who will continually seek the increase of love in the world.

Sometimes we get it so wrong. We forget God's protection. We do not call upon the name that will sustain us even in difficult times. But sometimes we get it so right. We show up to feed the marginalized breakfast at St. Paul Church. We make sure there is an environment of hope and safety in the Go-Zones which we help support. We collect clothing for the Open Door Drop-In Center. We support Health Clinics in a country where 48 million people do not have proper access to health care. Our youth will go to Key West this summer. It's an exotic place, but a place that also knows the grinding stone of poverty, pulverizing people's hopes and dreams into the dust of despair. These are all signs and symbols of Christians who refuse to picture Jesus unconnected to a needy world. The view of this Kingdom of God is different from the powerful worshipping the God of the economy, or the God who favors one nation over all others, or the God who loves only the perfect who never fail or falter or are wounded. When we are set apart, are sanctified, we keep insisting that that we will find our truest, deepest selves

when we focus on the least, the last and the lost.

In Mother Teresa's Sisters of Mercy new postulants were sent to the hospice in Calcutta, where daily the dying would be picked up off the streets, brought in, cleaned up and receive loving care until they died. One day she met a young nun in her study. She said, "I hope you noticed that in the Eucharist today, the priest handled the body of Christ with great care, because in the holy mystery of communion we see our Lord. When you go to the hospice today, look for Jesus." That evening the young nun came back to give her report. "Mother, they brought in a man dirty, wounds filled with maggots. I washed him and scraped the wounds and bandaged them. I saw Jesus."

If we are willing to be of another world, a divine commonwealth, we, too, shall see Jesus, in the least, the last, the lost. That is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Alleluia. He is Risen.