John 17:6-19

6 ‘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.7Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;8for 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.9I 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.10All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.11And 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.12While I was with them, I protected them in your name that[\*](javascript:void(0);) you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost,[\*](javascript:void(0);) so that the scripture might be fulfilled.13But 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.[\*](javascript:void(0);)14I 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.15I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.[\*](javascript:void(0);)16They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.17Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.18As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.19And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

**In the World, but not of the World**

So how many of you were confronted by a hostile mob when you came to church this morning? Were your neighbors throwing stones at your car as you rolled down the street, or are they waiting anxiously until you get home? Did you have any trouble getting into the church this morning? Were there any protesters blocking the entrance? I wonder how many people were unable to get here because they were arrested.

Of course I’m joking. You came this morning without any incident, as you’ve come here time and time again with hardly anyone noticing that you’ve even left your house. You don’t try to hide from anyone. You don’t worry about being followed. But in the day when this Gospel of John was written, going to church wasn’t quite so simple. In fact churches were people’s homes. The leaders of the Jewish faith had kicked the Christians out of the synagogues. Christianity was considered a dangerous cult. People looked with suspicion upon Christians. Christians were accused of being atheist because they didn’t believe in the gods that everyone else believed in. Many were arrested. Some were tortured. Some were executed. The world really did hate them.

Then everything turned upside down, at least in the Roman Empire. The once-despised Christians became the fashionable Christians under Emperor Constantine. Now the government was helping to build churches rather than raiding them. People were lining up to join the church. Most of the tribes that invaded the Roman Empire ended up as Christian converts, carrying the faith further north into Europe. Explorers and Conquistadors would carry the faith into the New World, so that today the Church is a common fixture in America.

But with the power shift that made Christianity the preferred religion in what we call the Western World, the Church got off track. As power and authority were given to church leaders, those leaders often forgot that the Church was there to serve God’s people, not the people to serve the church. And laws and customs were created to preserve the power of the Church. Many of you who were once (Catholic or perhaps still are) wonder what the difference is between Catholicism and Protestantism, and the simple answer is that it has to do with the authority of the Church. Martin Luther challenged some of the abusive practices of the Church, in essence challenging their authority, much the way Jesus in his words and action challenged the authority of the temple priests and elders. A revolution began and all across Europe nations and armies went to war over the authority of the Church.

Well you could have predicted what would happen. People began to question the authority of not only the Catholic Church but the Protestant Church as well. People began to question the need for religion, and there was a great liberation. Rather than relying upon the Church to tell people what to believe and what not to believe, what was right and what was wrong; people began to trust themselves to come up with the right answers. This is what sparked the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment period. A great movement called Humanism was sweeping the Western World, and you and I are benefactors of this movement. Our form of government based on self-determination, our American dream, based on individual initiative and the idea that we can determine our own future, all these are beliefs that spring from fountain of belief in our*selves*.

And we’ve gained a lot of confidence in ourselves. The enlightenment saw the growth of humanism, and a great optimism about the future of humanity based on our ability to evolve intellectually and morally. Man didn’t need the Church and believed that he didn’t need God. He discovered that the world did not collapse when he abandoned his beliefs. He had the tools within himself to secure for himself and others a bright future.

But while the humanists had noble aim, for each person to achieve their maximum potential, to be the best they could be, the modern humanist has been confronted with horrendous disappointments. Reasonable man was supposed to be able to reason his way through problems and avoid wars, yet the twentieth century may be the bloodiest century on record. The ideal social orders of Communist China, Cambodia, North Korea, and the Soviet Union have witnessed mass murder, brutal government suppression, and widespread corruption. The problem seems to be that our maximum potential is not easy to attain. Hence our ideologies remain just these: ideologies that are not grounded in reality.

Our humanist self-confidence has causes some to reassign authority to the Church with a “you-were-right-I-was-wrong” confession. Yet the flaws that drove people away from the church initially have not gone anywhere. And so their submission to the church’s authority is only superficial; inside one still feels doubt about the doctrine and beliefs of the Church. But submitting to the authority of the Church seems a better alternative than trusting anything else. But others are more cautious and won’t go back down that road. The Church, they feel, is just as corrupted as any other human institution, indeed it is as corrupted as humanity itself.

But Jesus says that he, like his disciples, like us, is in the world but not *of* the world. And a religious organization is a part of this world. As long as we remain part of this world, we are bound to failure. We must look beyond this world, to the one who holds true authority, to the one who so loved the world that he gave his son to this world. And only insofar as people can submit to that divine authority, to that which is not of this world, can we hope to transform this world into a better place.

I believe that the Church has the answer for this confused culture. We have a message, not a dogma, not a gimmick, not an ideology that promises something impossible, and that message is simple; we are fallen creatures – hence as long as we try to run our own show we are bound to fail. But if we truly serve the living God, he gives us what we need to transform this world, and the world does take notice. After Jesus had knocked over a few tables in the Temple and chased out some venders, the religious leaders asked him “by what authority do you do these things?” Jesus refers to John the Baptist and asks the leaders, “By what authority did John do what he did?” John had not been given any authority by anyone – he was not a scholar or a priest or a king, but he spoke a simple message – repent and be reconciled to God, and people recognized that his authority came from God. In Jesus Christ, we recognize that same, divine authority, and we give him authority based upon what he said and what he did. No one can claim that kind of authority for themselves.

Our Christian message is simple and hopeful: be reconciled to God. Dwell with him eternally. Do God’s will, and rely on his authority and power to accomplish it. We need to ask ourselves how well we are submitting to God as the ultimate authority. And we need to be bold, confident that this world needs to hear the wonderful, liberating news of God’s love and forgiveness.