

Entanglement

When you look at the prophets and apostles of the Bible, most of them had one thing in common—they were itinerants. They moved around a lot, traveling from place to place, stopping just long enough to proclaim God's Word before packing up and leaving. They never really got to enjoy putting down roots in a community; but then again, the message they carried was usually a challenging one, so hanging around too long would have put them at greater risk of persecution. This vagabond lifestyle gave them an outsider's perspective, a little social distance if you will, to say the hard truths of God. Much has changed since biblical times. The Word of God certainly hasn't changed, but the means of delivery has. Wandering preachers are rare. Far more often those who carry God's Word must be willing to preach the Word in season and out of season while weathering all seasons in the very same spot. Permanency has its value, but also its challenges. St. Paul's words captures this tension well when he instructs us to be soldiers of Christ. He then goes on to say that no one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life. What does that even look like for me, your pastor? What does that look like for you, the laity? I will pick on my own kind first. Critics of the Church think we parish pastors have lost our nerve; that we are afraid to speak the hard truths because we are afraid of losing our livelihood. I suppose there's some truth in that. After all, my economic welfare depends on your tithes and generosity, and I would be lying if I said I never catch myself weighing my words and gauging their possible effect on this or that person. But even still, this does not quite get to the heart of the matter. I think the real reason pastors are a bit tamer in their speech is it's hard to speak unpleasant truths to people whom you have grown to love. What is true of parish pastors, I imagine is true of you also. God calls each of you to speak His truth. Usually if you are willing to speak God's honest truth, though, it's because your anger has been aroused or because you have no personal attachment to the person on the receiving end of your words. It is much easier to vent your spleen to strangers than to those you love; and you are way more likely to soften your words to preserve a relationship. To speak the truth in love is a difficult, and sometimes an almost impossible, achievement. And that's because what you say today you have to live with tomorrow. Words have consequences, and once you say them, you can never take them back. You still have to go on crossing paths with that person, rubbing shoulders, and making eye contact.

So, how are we to live Paul's message with any sense of coherence? Is it even possible not to entangle ourselves in the affairs of this life? While it is certainly impossible for us to live like the itinerant prophets and apostles of old, God in His infinite wisdom instructs us to adopt their way of life in Spirit. For it is possible to be in the world, but not of the world otherwise Christ would not have said as much. St. Paul this morning is just echoing Jesus' prayer. When St. Paul tells us not to be entangled, he is not suggesting we put our heads in the sand or sequester ourselves in some secluded spot. But rather, that we live above the fray, above reproach. By God's good grace, we must train ourselves not to want what others want, desire what others desire, live as others live. We mustn't get swept away by the currents of the mainstream. We might not be able to physically change our environments or relocate, but that doesn't mean we have to adopt the worldly lifestyle. We can live differently even as we share the same material world as those around us. Looking the same, but not being the same creates a certain objectivity for us to share our faith, to give witness to the hope that is within us.

This of course is the challenge. But the blessings are many. By untangling ourselves from the affairs of the world, we are in a much better position to see the world for what it is: broken and in need of God's redemption. Our up-close and personal contact helps us to be much better diagnosticians of a sin-sick world. And the one thing we have, which God's chosen messengers of the past did not have, is that our ongoing personal relationships create a permanent space for us to apply God's healing Word incrementally; not just a one and done approach, but a slow, continual application of God's eternal remedy. After all, most of the miseries of the human race are due not to outright malice or wickedness, but to misdirected zeal and unbalanced virtue. Who better to help those who have lost their way than you who occupy the same world and live with the same temptations as they do. One conversation at a time, one day at a time. And the message we share is this: no one is innocent—not you, not me, not anyone—and at the same time no one is beyond salvation. There is no saint without a past, no sinner without a future. The representatives of God are seldom divine and the minions of Satan are never quite diabolical. The Christian adventure is not found in judging others for we are no better than anyone else. We are conscious of the same difficulties in our own experience, which we note in others. Rather, the Christian adventure is this mutual search for truth, a seeking after God: His Word, His answer, His remedy. This awareness allows each of us to be prophets without being forced into exile. Amen.