

John 17:1-11 – For Those the Father Has Given Me

A few weeks ago we heard of Jesus the Good Shepherd. We love that imagery but at the end of John's chapter is a statement we do not like. Jesus says, **"You do not believe because you are not of My flock."** We hear it differently. We hear: You are not part of My flock because you do not believe. We want to believe that anyone could be part of God's flock, that it is merely a matter of a decision or choice. Jesus refers here to election. The elect believe and it shows they are the elect. The non-elect do not believe and it reveals they were never part of the elect of God.

It all leaves us with a confusing and unsatisfactory conundrum. There is not reasonable way out. God has elected those who are saved and those who do not believe are not the elect of God. And then we encounter this solemn moment when Jesus is praying in the Garden, sweating as it were with blood, and Jesus prays not for the world but for the elect—those whom the Father has given Him.

Jesus says: "I am not praying for the world (unbelievers)..." Jesus certainly died for all but this Gospel is met with unbelief as well as faith. Not everyone will be Christian and this is not simply because not everyone has heard the Gospel. No, there are hearts whom the Spirit cannot bring to faith.

Jesus knows this, of course, and He is troubled by it but at the same time His concern remains for the elect – those who will be saved. Therein lies our problem. Jesus knows who will be saved and who will not. But we are not privy to that. We can see only outwardly—by the confession of words and life. This doctrine is given us not to identify who does or does not belong to the Father but to comfort us when we face a world in which Christianity seems under the gun and Christians suffer persecution. Our desire may be for a world overrun with Christians but instead our Lord prays for us because He knows the score—He knows we will suffer persecution and disappointment in this age.

Jesus has given the elect His Word of life and the Spirit and that they believe is evidence that they are the elect, those whom the Father has chosen to give the kingdom. Those who are not the elect are also revealed by faith, by the lack of faith. Yet it is not ours to judge or discern but it belongs only to the Lord.

Jesus says: **"I am praying [for the faithful] ... those whom the Father has given to Me ..."** Our comfort does not lie in dreams of world domination or earthly victory. Our comfort lies not in a utopia in which all people believe and live holy and moral lives. Our comfort is that our names are written in the Book of Life. Christianity will never be the universal faith of all people and it may not even be the faith of the majority. That's not our problem. We believe and we speak the Gospel and God does all the rest. It is His to discern the heart and ours to witness Christ.

Our comfort lies in the fact that our names are written in the Book of Life, that we are baptized. Our comfort lies in that the Spirit works faith in us to know and rejoice in Christ has done and given to us as gift. Our comfort lies not in daydreams of overcoming the world but in the Kingdom that is not of this world, whose entrance is by Christ the gate and who belong by the gracious will of our heavenly Father.

Our Lord has given us His name and this is enough to comfort us in persecution and in the battle to remain faithful. His name planted in baptismal water, spoken in the living voice of the Word, and eaten and drunk in the body and blood of Holy Communion—this is our comfort. Yet our eyes behold a world at odds with Christ and His kingdom. The real question for us when what we see conflicts with our desire is whether or not His Word and promise are enough for us.

Let me say it again. Unbelief does not cause one not to be the elect of God but it is the mark of it. Faith does not cause election but it is the mark of it. We want the romantic imagery of a world converted on heart at a time until everyone believes. TV preachers tend to preach on making wise decisions—of course, the wisest is the decision to accept Jesus into your heart. Yet Scripture insists that no one can say Jesus is Lord except the Spirit

prompt them. Faith is not a mere choice or decision. Faith is the gift of the Spirit acting upon the will of the Father. The truth is harsh. Not all will believe. God knows this. Do we? Do we cling to the notion that we can bring people to faith if we try hard enough? Do we cling to the falsehood that faith is merely a matter of choice and the more informed we are the more likely we will choose to believe? Or do we believe Jesus?

We may want it both ways but we can have it only God's way. If we cannot save ourselves, then we cannot make others believe with the right word or gesture at the right time. We have the Word, we speak the Word, and this Word is enough to sustain us in faith and to do the Father's bidding. Awakened by the Spirit through the living voice of the Word of God, we believe and are incorporated into the saving death and life-giving resurrection of Jesus in baptism. We are fed upon the flesh and blood of Christ in the Eucharist to sustain us in this faith and life and comfort us that we belong to the Lord. We are kept the Lord's by our connection to the Word and Table of the Lord. No one can steal us from the Father but we can reject the promise of God and choose to stand apart from Christ and outside the Kingdom of God.

Today is a lesson in the promise. And a question: Is the promise of God enough for us, to assure us that we are Christ's, even when we see earthly turmoil, persecution, and defeats? Christ prays for us that His Word and promise will be enough, enough to believe, enough to endure, enough to sustain us when our eyes fail to see any earthly progress for the Kingdom and we suffer with Christ and for Him ... and enough to keep us faithful unto death so we shall receive the crown of everlasting life.