

“He’s in the World Today
3. Get Out of the Garden
John 14:23-29

This is the last sermon in this series entitled, “He’s in the World Today.” Our theme song has been the great old gospel song, “He Lives.” “I serve a risen Savior. He’s in the world today.” I’ve been talking about how the Resurrected Christ continues to come to us. He appeared in the flesh to his disciples for forty days following the resurrection. Then he ascended into heaven. But over the past 2,000 years he has continues to appear to his followers in the Spirit, just as he promised he would do at the Last Supper.

Many great songs celebrate the fulfilling of that promise. “He Lives is one of them. Another is the song we opened the service with, “In the Garden.” “In the Garden” is a favorite from the old Cokesbury hymnal. It has a beautiful alto line, so it is often sung as a duet. It describes the joys of an early morning prayer time in a rose garden, where Christ’s presence is very real. It is a wonderful and greatly loved song, and it is a favorite of mine. It reminds me of our beautiful prayer garden here at Chapelwood.

However, I’m not comfortable with the last verse. It doesn’t fit my experience. It says, “I’d stay in the garden with him ‘til the night around me be falling. But he bids me go with a voice of woe. His voice to me is calling.”

As I say, that’s just not my experience. I have this picture of Christ saying, with tears in his eyes, “I’m so sorry, but I have to ask you to leave now. But don’t worry. You just make it through the day as best you can, and I’ll be here waiting for you tomorrow morning.”

That would be like a football coach ending his locker room talk before the game by saying, “Fellows, I know you cherish this time we share together. I wish we could just stay here together all evening. But you guys have a game to play. So, go ahead. I’ll be here waiting for you when you get back.”

No, the pre-game locker room talk is for the purpose of instructing and inspiring the players to get out there and play a great game. The players may enjoy the talk, but they enjoy the game a whole lot more. My guess is that if being on the football team just consisted of listening to locker room talks, there wouldn’t be many going out for the team. It’s the game that makes being on the team fun and exciting. Besides that, the team doesn’t leave the coach in the locker room. He’s out there with them, leading them and directing them throughout the game.

That’s my experience of prayer time. I’ve told you that Christ is real to me. He does walk with me and talk with me. He does tell me I am his own. I need those times of quiet solitude with him. Without them, I quickly become angry, frustrated, and discouraged. As I spend time in prayer, Christ helps me to see things differently. He helps me to look at life more objectively and see the truth more clearly. He helps me transform negative and destructive thoughts and feelings into positive ones, about myself, about life, and about other people.

But the last thing I want to do is spend all day alone in prayer. The fun is getting into the game of life, getting out there with Christ and Christ's people, working alongside of the rest of the team, as we struggle together to build the Kingdom of God.

In the Upper Room on the night before he was crucified, Jesus was giving his disciples last minute instructions. He said, "Those who love me will obey my commandments. And my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

We know what Jesus commandments were: Love people, live holy and righteous lives, and work to build God's kingdom here on earth. Anyone who is not committed to those things, or at least wants to be committed to those things, really shouldn't seek a relationship with Christ. They will be disappointed. While they are in the garden looking for quality time with Jesus, Jesus will be out there in the world caring for people.

I'll tell you something about John Wesley that you may not know. John Wesley had a wife. I know this sounds a bit like the DaVinci Code. (Did you know that John Wesley secretly had a wife, just like Jesus?) Well, not exactly. The rumors that Jesus had a wife are strange speculations by people who are looking for something new and novel to get excited about. On the other hand, historians know very well that John Wesley got married when he was 48 to a woman who went by the name of Molly. The marriage ended 30 years later when she died. However, it actually ended much earlier than that. It was never a happy marriage. She left him often. The last permanent separation was ten years before she died. The problem was she wanted John Wesley all to herself. She did not share his commitment to ministering to the poor, lost and hurting people of England. She wanted him to stay home and devote all his time and energy to her. He wanted her to go with him as he traveled about preaching and organizing the Methodists. They could have had a wonderful, happy marriage, if she had shared his commitment to caring for people. But she didn't. So, the marriage was a source of frustration for both of them.

The same thing will happen to people who look for a personal relationship with Christ but don't share his commitment to caring for others.

Jesus and his disciples certainly spent time alone. We can only imagine how wonderful that was, to sit and listen to Jesus teach. But that was not the way they spent most of their time. Most of the time they were out among multitudes of people, caring for them. That's what Jesus called the disciples to do, not to just sit around talking with him, but to take what Jesus was teaching them and use it to care for people.

Can you imagine what Jesus would have said if the disciples had said to him, "Lord, let's not go talk to people today. Let's just stay here and spend a quiet, peaceful day together?" Jesus would have said, "Those people need me. I'd love to have you go with me as I go to care for them. Or you can stay here alone and enjoy the peace and quiet of this place. It's your choice."

That's pretty much what Christ says to us today.

Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another." What Jesus was saying is this: If we will love people, as he commanded us to do, then he will come to us and abide with us.

Or, maybe a little more accurately, if you want to love people, the Spirit of Christ will come and live with you. The truth is that we can't really love people until we receive the Spirit of Christ.

It's not easy to love people. People are sinners. And sooner or later they will do something you don't like. If you don't have the Spirit of grace and forgiveness which comes from Christ, that will be the end of that relationship.

The problem is that, eventually, you run out of people.

People who don't have the abiding Spirit of Christ are like some 'coons I once dealt with. One time I was pastoring a church out in the country, and I decided to raise a vegetable garden. One of the things I planted was a patch of sweet corn. Corn takes forever to grow. I watched those stalks grow and grow, stretching higher and higher. Finally I saw the tiny little ears start forming. Slowly, the ears grew out and the little kernels began to form. After weeks of waiting, they were nearly ready to be picked. One evening I looked them over, and I decided I would pull them the next day. The next morning I went out to harvest the corn. Disaster had struck. Some 'coons had come in during the night. They had systematically gone through the patch of corn. They had pulled each ear of corn, taken one or two bites out of it and thrown it on the ground. After all those weeks and months of waiting, I didn't get a single ear of corn from that garden. Evidently, they didn't find a single ear of corn which satisfied them.

Without the Spirit of Christ, people are like those 'coons. People are a disappointment to them. They go from person to person looking for someone who is perfect and are disappointed. Finally, some folks decide they would rather not have to deal with people at all.

Sometimes these folks use spirituality as a means of avoiding people. "Why do I need people? I've got Jesus. I can go to the garden alone and talk with him, and he never says anything unkind or cruel to me. He never needs anything from me. He just talks about how much he loves me. I would be perfectly content to stay here in this quiet, safe place with him and have nothing to do with people."

But Jesus won't let us stay hidden in the garden. He calls us to get out there and learn to love people. He knows they need us, and we need them. He knows that we will not be satisfied until we both love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength - and we love our neighbors as ourselves.

And Jesus cannot be satisfied until we get out of the garden and care for people. Because Jesus cares about those people outside the garden. He loves them as much as he loves us. He wants to use us to take care of them. He comes to use to love us and prepare us to share his love with other people.

The Resurrected Christ does come and dwell with us, just as he promised. As the songs say, he does walk with us and talk with us. He is a living presence in our lives.

But Christ doesn't just live in us. More importantly, he lives through us. Christ is not only in the world today through the Spirit. Christ is also in the world today through us. When Christ comes to us, he calls us to be his body in the world, as we care for people and love them in the name of Christ.

So, if Christ has come to you, it's because he has work for you to do. If you are not ready to get to work, don't ask him into your life. If you are, he will come to you.

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