

The Ownership Question- Whose We Are

Colleagues,

Yesterday was the summer solstice. In the USA the saying goes: "Summertime and the livin' is easy." That's never been scientifically documented, and probably isn't true. But that's my excuse for sending out a sermon for this week's ThTh. Robin has her plate extra full these days. "Summertime easy" is not true for her. I've been out of town for two weeks and have had other stuff on my plate too. So here's a homily. I was asked to be the preacher in our parish church, Bethel Lutheran in St. Louis, when our pastor was attending our regional synod assembly. It was June 4, 2000, the 7th Sunday of Easter.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

Text: The RSL Gospel for the day, John 17: 6-19

Hamlet had it wrong. "To be, or not to be" is not THE question. He left out one word: **W-h-o-s-e**. "Whose to be or whose not to be," that is THE question. All three scripture readings say that this a.m. Even today's Psalm, the first one in the Psalter. The difference between the wicked and the righteous is not behavior, but belonging. Where you are planted, is the psalm's picture-word.

Who you belong to, whose you are, that is the big question. How about us? The answer, it seems, is simple—at least for us. We're here in church this a.m. So we're Christians. Christ's people. We belong to Jesus. No problem, no sweat, piece of cake. Well....

is it really so?

Even if that were the case for this Sunday morning hour, there were 167 more hours since last Sunday's service. Who did we belong to during all those hours? Who all?

Even being in church is no guarantee that for this hour we belong to Christ. Our bodies and heads are here, sure. But for most of us, I suspect, what's **IN** our heads, what's **IN** our hearts—right now—is a scramble of other owners. Other agendas came with us when we walked into church. And we can't just shake our head or do some CPR on our hearts to change that. So we need help. That's what this whole worship hour wants to do. To get us re-connected to the One we really belong to and then project that belonging beyond this place out into those 167 coming hours this week. That entails the wild expectation that this one hour can help to keep us belong to Christ through all those 167 hours coming up. Let's see if it works.

The formula that Jesus uses about us in today's Gospel is "You are in the world, but do not belong to the world."

There's no question that we are **IN** the world. The problem is the belonging. Our world makes its pitch in a zillion ways to get ownership of us, to get us to belong to it.

Diagnosis-1 Exposed to alien owners

Who all haven't we belonged to in this week's past 167 hours? Who or what hasn't made a pitch to own us? Our own problems. Fears. Messages/tapes running in our heads. Memories. Feelings. That's just stuff on the inside. Outside owners: Other people making claims on our lives—even on our hearts. Advertising. How many hundreds (or is it thousands?) of ads haven't you seen/heard in the past 167 hours? All trying to get your attention—and then to get **YOU**. The goal for all of these alien owners is simple: Gotcha!

D-2 Hooked by an alien word

“Hang onto this, trust this, do this, get this, take this course, adopt this diet, practice these seven principles, do these exercises – and you’ll be more, have more, be better, than you were before.” It’s so easy to respond: “You, know, I believe that. I’m gonna go for it.” If we could keep that stuff out of our heart, keep our hearts from hanging onto those pitches, we might squeak by. But partial commitment to alien owners is dicey; they regularly ask us to commit ourselves “wholeheartedly.” When we Christian folk make whole-hearted commitments to anything other than the Christ who owns us, we have to evict the prior owner. We belong to somebody else.

D-3 Dead in our tracks with these alien owners.

It’s not merely that such belonging to world-owners is a no-no. Worse than that, it’s a killer. These aliens don’t die for you; you give, pay, sacrifice, finally die for them. They leave you life-less even though you’re still alive. That’s especially true about the Life that Lasts—as I John 5 portrays it today. “God gave us the life that lasts, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life. When you don’t have the Son, you don’t have the life that lasts.” To “have the Son” is to be had by him. Ownership stuff. Whose you are. You can keep on going in daily life with alien owners and the alternate life they offer, but the God-gas-gauge on our dashboard says: Empty. How long can you run on empty?

A New Prognosis – to cross-out D-3

Alternate ownership, not alien, but the kind we’re created for. Christ’s whole job on earth was regaining ownership of God’s kids who got conned into going with alien owners. Folks caught in the world’s “Gotcha.” Regaining ownership. Getting us to belong where we belong! That’s one of the big words used in the N.T. for what he was doing: re-demption. This John 17 text is all about Jesus’s role in God’s ownership reclamation project.

The last act is Jesus' "coming to the Father," which is John's language for the grand finale of the cross. Last Thursday was the feast of the Ascension, the last movement of the grand finale. Jesus returns home—but not alone. He returns bringing all God's lost and strayed kids along with him.

The John 17 text is one-of-a-kind. A tete-a-tete between Two persons of the Trinity. Father and Son. Actually a monologue. Jesus talking to Abba. There's no other chapter in the Bible like it.

And the topic: Talking about us! How John the Evangelist got this material is a mystery. However he got it, he put it into his writing so we could benefit; so we could be insiders too—in more ways than one. Not just insiders listening in on this high-level exchange, but insiders, belongers, to the whole operation.

A New Prognosis to cross out D-2:

"Protected in your name" This new ownership persists in the very face of the world persisting in its opposition. "World hates them" says the text. That is strong language. "In someone's name" is ownership language. Protected in God's name means being connected, connected to Christ, connected by "believing," Jesus says. Faith constitutes the protector-connector. **WHO** your heart listens to determines **WHOSE** you are. It's that simple.

A New Prognosis to cross out D-1:

"Sanctified in the truth" and "sent into the world" How might it look during the next 167 hours coming up this week? Sanctified does not mean "holier than thou." Root meaning of the Biblical term is "different." Owned by Christ and the "truth of God" you **ARE** different—not just different from "them," but different from the "who" we were before the ownership transfer. That means "different" out there in the same old world where we regularly live. Even different from what we were this past week. Even

more, “sent” by Christ into that world. That means we’re on assignment with an agenda, Christ’s agenda. Getting folks who are hooked by deadly owners, getting them reconnected to the Owner who offers the life that lasts.

Hamlet had it half-right. “To be or not to be” is half of the question. The other half is what it takes “to be.” The Gospel claims that “to be” is to have the life that lasts. All other options are “not to be.” Jesus claims to offer the life that lasts. We trust him for it—not just this hour here in church, but out in the world—all week long.