

THEY ARE YOURS!

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Text: John 17:6-19 from *The Message*

SCRIPTURE

John 17:6-19

I spelled out your character in detail to the men and women you gave me. They were yours in the first place; then you gave them to me, and they have now done what you said. They know now, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that everything you gave me is firsthand from you, for the message you gave me, I gave them; and they took it, and were convinced that I came from you. They believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I'm not praying for the God-rejecting world but for those you gave me, for they are yours by right. Everything mine is yours, and yours mine, and my life is on display in them. For I'm no longer going to be visible in the world; they'll continue in the world while I return to you. Holy Father, guard them as they pursue this life that you conferred as a gift through me, so they can be one heart and mind as we are one heart and mind. As long as I was with them, I guarded them in the pursuit of the life you gave through me; I even posted a night watch. And not one of them got away, except for the rebel bent on destruction (the exception that proved the rule of Scripture).

Now I'm returning to you. I'm saying these things in the world's hearing so my people can experience my joy completed in them. I gave them your word; the godless world hated them because of it, because they didn't join the world's ways, just as I didn't join the world's ways. I'm not asking that you take them out of the world but that you guard them from the Evil One. They are no more defined by the world than I am defined by the world. Make them holy—consecrated—with the truth; your word is consecrating truth. In the same way that you gave me a mission in the world, I give them a mission in the world. I'm consecrating myself for their sakes so they'll be truth-consecrated in their mission.

SERMON

Today is confirmation Sunday. In just a few minutes this wonderful group of our youth will make a confirmation of their faith and two of them will be baptized. I love confirmation. It is one of my favorite times of year because it is a pivotal moment in the life of our young people. Since last September, Pastor Howard and I have been meeting with these six young people on Wednesday evenings. We have considered and explored a lot of topics and ideas, everything from who wrote the Bible, to can it be proven that God exists, to why Jesus had to die. We have learned a lot together about the journey of faith and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We have talked about what it means to be a Presbyterian and even visited Temple Judah and explored what it means to live by other faith traditions. At the end of last month, they met with Session and have been received into full adult membership of our church. Soon they will stand before you and declare their faith in Jesus Christ and join with us as we live out our mission of internally nurturing and externally serving.

And so my message this morning is directed to the Confirmation Class. This is a big important step that they are taking and so I want to say a few things to them. But I think it would be okay if the rest of you here listened in.

Today celebrates a journey. Our young people have made it!! And soon they will stand before this congregation and make a promise to God. It is not a promise to be perfect. It is not a promise to have no doubts or questions, it's not even a promise not to get lost. Those are all things we all do. Rather, it is a promise to love God and to do everything in their power to follow where that love takes them.

Now, I imagine that they probably don't want to hear this today but instead of the freedom of this grown-up, or growing-up, commitment they are making, in our scripture reading Jesus places the disciples back under God's direction. Did you catch that? He said "They are yours!" - not they have graduated and are free, but "they are yours!" No one knows better that we are not our own than our young people. From the beginning of time parents have been constantly telling their children what to do and where to go, how to behave and what they should say or perhaps more often what they shouldn't say. Parents decide what we will eat, where we will sleep, and when we will get up. Parents are constantly telling their children to do their homework, clean their room, wash the dishes. And parents will always be parents. Just last night my mother was asking me how my sermon was coming. Children understand in a very concrete way that we are not our own. And while we may sometimes resist these bonds that hold us and wish we could just do what we want, there is also something very comforting in knowing that we are not left completely on our own, unaided in a big and sometimes scary world. So I think it is a comfort to hear Jesus' prayer for the disciples, placing them under God's perfect care, binding them to God in a relationship of blessing.

And just as Jesus prayed for the disciples, this morning, as I and so many others have been doing all along their journey, I have a prayer for you, the confirmation class.

First, I pray that you will cherish and exercise the privilege of prayer all the days of your life. Because when we pray, we open ourselves up to all sorts of wonderful possibilities, to comfort like no other, and to the peace that passes all understanding. Of course we often treat prayer as a vending machine, insert request – receive desired result.

A good example of this is the story of a mother who sent her fifth grade boy up to bed. A few minutes later she went to make sure that he was getting into bed. When she stuck her head into his room, she saw that he was kneeling beside his bed in prayer. Pausing to listen to his prayers, she heard her son praying over and over again. "Let it be Tokyo! Please dear God, let it be Tokyo!" When he finished his prayers, she asked him, "What did you mean, 'Let it be Tokyo'?" "Oh," the boy said with embarrassment, "we had our geography exam today and I was praying that God would make Tokyo the capital of France."

Prayer doesn't work that way does it? It doesn't work the way we want it and often the answers we are seeking don't come in the way or time frame we want. Prayer is not some magic trick by which we get God to do what we want. Prayer is a conversation by which we open ourselves up to God. Ultimately, the power of prayer is not that we succeed in changing God, but that God succeeds in changing us, in making us more like Christ. And so I pray that you confirmands will bind yourselves to God in prayer.

My second prayer for the confirmation class is that they will develop a life-long habit of scripture reading. Now I know that reading the Bible isn't always easy reading. It can be hard to figure out just what is going on and what the meaning is. But I don't want them to read it, just reading for the sake of it, but really taking it into their heart and making it the guiding light of their life. When you do that you allow the Spirit to enter in and open up the words in a way you never thought possible.

I pray that they will make the words of scripture a part of who they are. And so I pray that they will bind themselves to God's word.

And finally I pray that you will always keep yourselves connected to the fellowship of believers wherever you may be. I imagine that sometimes you just don't understand why your parents keep dragging you to church. Maybe you're not all that crazy about sitting through worship – all the preacher does is talk, talk, talk, talk! Maybe you think Sunday School is a waste of time, and you'd probably rather be home sleeping. But coming to church is not just about the sermon or the Sunday school classes – it's also about the community. It's about being a part of a group of people who, knowing they are imperfect, and knowing they can't move toward something alone, gather together for growth, for love, and for encouragement. The body of Christ, formed by the disciples of Jesus, gathered together is a blessing like no other.

An anonymous writer once wrote about the community of God's people in a way that I find inspiring and challenging and exciting. It's both a description of who we are and a call to action. Listen to these words:

'We are the fellowship of the unashamed. We have Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast. We have stepped over the line. The decision has been made. We are disciples of Jesus. We won't look back, let up, slow down or back away. Our past is redeemed, Our present makes sense, Our future secure. We are finished and done with low living, sight-walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tame division, mundane talking, cheap giving and small goals. We no longer need prestige, position, promotion, praises, or popularity. We don't have to be right. We don't have to be first. We don't have to be recognized, praised, or rewarded. We live by faith, lean on God's presence, walk by patience, lift by prayer, and labor by power. Our face is set, our gait is fast, our goal is Heaven. Our road is narrow, our way is rough, our companions few. Our Guide reliable - Our mission clear. We cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed. We will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of the adversary, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, meander in the maze of mediocrity. We won't give up, shut up, let up. Until we've, stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, preached up for the cause of Christ. We are Servants for Christ.

Now I know this is a pretty lofty statement...a pretty high bar, but I can assure you that no one person can do this on their own. Just like the children's time with the blocks...when we do it together, as the body of Christ, we can do all this and more. And so this morning I pray that you will continue to choose to bind yourselves to the community of Christ. Christ has given you a mission. You are not defined by this world. And so Arayah, Taryn, Carolyn, Aiden, Maddy, and Olivia, and all of us here, remember who you are and whose you are. Paul says, and I say to you: Beloved, today you enter into "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people; once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy." Thanks be to God.