

“Quality of Life”
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26;
1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

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Well, that scripture from John’s Gospel? Would anybody like to help me understand what it said? For when I read through it the first time it felt like there were all these words washing over me, and I wanted to say, “What in the world is here!?” Yes, “world” is one of those words that appears throughout that passage. What I began to notice was that I had to pay attention to some of the words because my conception of those words was making the passage harder to understand. The passage might have something to say that my conception of those words wasn’t quite capturing.

When I think about the world, I often think about a globe or a map of the world. There’s some sense of “the world” being somewhere other than local—interior versus exterior, perhaps. But in general I have a vision of what the world is, this globe that we’re thinking about. And yet, if you said “world” in the time of Jesus, I don’t think they thought of a globe or a map of this round thing that we live on. They probably would have thought of their own locale, so if you were in Palestine you might have thought of the nature of the way things were in that area of the world at that time. They might have recognized they had another world impinging upon them, often called the Hellenistic culture, of first the Greeks and then the Romans as they moved in. So “world” had more of an idea of context.

In fact, it’s interesting that if you look at the root of the word “world” in Greek, it is *cosmos*, which is the root of our word *cosmos*. In the root of that word there’s a sense of it being ordered. It can even mean at times the way people accessorize themselves to make themselves look a particular way. So what this word means is something about how we have ordered our life as human beings, how we’ve given order to creation on top of what was already there.

So what I began to think about is how we order our lives. I love one of the images The Bible Project has given me about how the story at the very beginning of taking the fruit was about deciding to know what good and evil is for ourselves rather than listening to God. It feels to me that oftentimes we create human order based on our own decision about what is good and evil, and I want to suggest that sometimes we do a pretty poor job.

The context we are in really does create sometimes very egregious wrongs. So if we think about child soldiers around the world, 40% of which are in Africa, what we recognize is that they are put in a circumstance, a context, that doesn’t let them be little boys. I heard one speak at a Presbytery meeting and he talked about how he and a friend of his were abducted and made to be child soldiers. On their first time out, the leader of their group told one of the boys, his friend, to kill one of the people they had captured. He wouldn’t do it, so the leader shot him.

That's an incredibly egregious way in which a context causes somebody to be something they don't want to be, that leads them into being something they should never be. But it's not always that clear cut. It's not always somebody standing over you with a gun.

Here's another example. There was a guy named Eichmann, who was a Nazi functionary. His job was to deal with the Jewish problem. So at first he was looking for ways to deport them. Then they came up with a different solution—extermination. He was the one who helped create the logistics of the trains, and create the concentration camps, and design the gas chambers. And yet, when he was on trial this very ordinary person basically said, "I was just following orders. I was just doing what I was told to do." Hannah Arendt, who was watching and writing about this, called it "the banality of evil" and talked about how it worked into the very order of his life and the order of the life around him, so he could claim that he was just following orders. His ideology helped shape that, but it wasn't something he had come up with on his own. It was one that had come from being in a context. He recognized during the trial that they were trying him as a war criminal, and basically he still held onto it being his way of being somebody. Arendt said, "He seemed to rather be a war criminal than a nobody."

It describes to me the power of our social life, of the way we order the world around us, how we order our lives, the order we live in and the context of the life we live. So it might be something very easy to see or it might be something that creeps into the ordered way we live.

The interesting thing in this passage is the contrast between the idea of "world," which is the ordered way of humans doing things, and the word "word." If we think about that word "word," it's really not just the idea that you've got a noun or an adjective or these kinds of words. In John, the word "word" is *logos*. If we look back to the beginning of John, we know that it starts off with "In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God." So we know that we have this idea that it's bigger, it's different than just the word. In fact, in some ways it's Jesus himself as the *logos*.

Another way of describing it is the divine reason giving order and giving form and meaning to our world, our life, our universe. So in a way, when the idea of "word" comes up, there's a whole different ordering that is identified, a whole different meaning. It's the ordering and meaning of God, who created all that is, who gives us life, who invites us into life. The message that comes to us is the love of God in Jesus Christ. So here we have these two contrasts between the ordering of God and the ordering of humankind. We know we live into these two different ways of being, and he's talking about being in the world and yet allowing the word of God to be what shapes us. He's inviting his disciples to do that same thing.

What does that mean for us today? There are a lot of different ways we can order and shape our lives. Consumerism is one way of doing that—getting the best deal, thinking about what I can have that is best for me. Business economics—we could

shape our lives around productivity and efficiency and profit. We can shape our lives around power or status. We can shape our lives around security. Or we can shape our lives around Jesus. I think there's a whole different set of concepts, ways of thinking, the message of God in Jesus Christ, the *logos* of God that shapes our lives differently and invites us to live into those—justice, kindness, beauty, happiness, love, peace.

When we begin to think about what Jesus is teaching us and guiding us into as he is praying this prayer and inviting God to continue to work with God's people, he's saying, "I'm not taking these people out of the world." All that stuff is here with us, but he is inviting us to recognize what is shaping us and to allow God's word, Jesus' life, God's way of seeing, God's logic, God's reason, God's message, God's love to shape our lives, to change us to be distinctive people.

You see, what he goes on, then, to begin to talk about sanctification, what he's talking about there is the idea that as we open our lives to God we begin to be shaped by the context we live in. If that context is the word of God, if the context is Jesus Christ, if the context is his love and grace, if that's our context, we will be shaped in a particular way. We will have a particular quality of life. People will notice this particular quality of life in us. A quality of goodness and grace. A quality of justice and mercy. It's something we will bring into our life together, into our world as we approach everything we do, every problem we face.

I think it was last week or the week before that we were reminded that one of the last things Jesus said was, "Love one another even as I have loved you." I think that is one way of thinking about the context we live into and where he wants us to go. There was a child in our congregation who heard that phrase and was asked, "What do you think of it?" The child said, "Wow! That's a lot of love!"

We have a lot of love to live into as followers and disciples of Jesus Christ and we have a world out there that needs that love, that needs the goodness we can bring, that needs disciples of Christ. Amen.