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John 17:6-21

TRAVELING MERCIES

Among all the various kinds of prayers we offer to God, prayers for safety are among the most common. You put your kindergarten child on the bus for her first day of school, and as the bus pulls away and you watch her little face in the window disappear, you say a silent prayer: "Lord, keep her safe." Or you help your son move into his college dorm and after you hug him goodbye and walk away, leaving him to face this big world on his own, you utter your private prayer: "Lord, keep him safe." Or you send your husband, or wife, or child off to spend their military tour of duty overseas, and you pray: "Lord, keep them safe." Or your spouse leaves to go on a long business trip and you pray: "Keep them safe." Think of how often we pray for the safety of our loved ones. And also for ourselves. At the close of our Session meetings, we offer a prayer before we all depart to go home, in which we often pray for God's traveling mercies to go with us. Traveling mercies are the kinds of prayers we make before we or a loved one undertake a journey in life. We pray for traveling mercies because we know that this world is full of dangers.

Jesus is praying for traveling mercies in our scripture today. Specifically, he prays for us, and for our safety as we travel through this life.

When Jesus offers this prayer, it is Thursday night, the day before his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus knows what is coming. And so he prays. Now, it would seem logical that Jesus might focus his prayer on himself. After all, he is the one that is about to be arrested, betrayed and denied by his closest friends. He is the one who will endure suffering. He is the one who will die. But what Jesus does instead is he prays for his disciples. He prays for their

safety. He prays to God to protect them. He prays for these individuals he has come to know, and love, and care about. But he not only prays for his disciples, he also prays for us. There at the end of our passage today Jesus prays for you and me sitting here in this sanctuary in 2018 when he says, "I ask not only on behalf of these (the disciples), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word." Jesus prays for us, for you and me today. And he prays for our protection as we make our way through this world.

Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, tells the story of a father and his young son, who journey through the ruins of a post-apocalyptic earth. The world has become a dismal, colorless, barren landscape where nothing can grow. There are no crops to sustain life and the living must scavenge what they can from the remains of abandoned houses and stores, sometimes even resorting to cannibalism. The story, however, is primarily about the depths of the father's love for his son, who he must protect from the cold, from starvation and illness, and from the bad men who roam this lawless land. But as they journey, the father grows increasingly ill. And he knows that he must figure out some kind of plan for the day when he will need to send his young, precious, vulnerable son into the future without him.

There sitting at the table with his disciples, Jesus knows he will be sending his beloved followers into the future without him. They too will be vulnerable to the hostile forces and circumstances of this world. And so he prays for them and he prays for us.

Now notice what Jesus does *not* pray for in this prayer. He does *not* pray that the future will be easy for us. He does *not* pray that there will be no hardships or trials or difficulties in our lives. That's the kind of prayer *we* tend to pray in our evening prayers, as we lie down at night, and pray for the protection of our loved ones: our children, our spouses, our sisters and brothers, our dearest friends. We worry about accidents, illnesses, hardships, that could befall our loved

ones. And so we say our prayer for protection: "O Lord, don't let anything bad happen to them." And it's not that there is anything wrong with this kind of prayer. But Jesus doesn't pray this kind of prayer. Maybe he doesn't say this kind of prayer for physical safety because it's just not realistic. If we are to live engaged lives in this world, hardships and dangers and difficulties will come our way and the way of our loved ones. The last thing Jesus would want is for his followers to pull away from the world, to hunker down and withdraw from the world for the sake of being safe. Jesus sends his followers out to engage the world, not to withdraw from it. Because this world, while at times hostile, is nevertheless the object of God's gracious love. God loves this world.

Jesus also understood that physical safety is not the most important kind of safety. There are other, greater dangers to us than whether we are physically safe from harm. That is hard for us to really comprehend because so much of our focus is given to our physical safety. We pass all kinds of laws to protect us physically--driving laws, food safety laws, the proper disposal of chemical wastes. We focus our concerns on whether our homes are safe, whether our neighborhoods are safe, whether our nation is safe from gun violence or terrorist attacks. And all of this is important. And yet, physical safety is not the only kind of protection that is important. Jesus knows that there are other kinds of dangers we his followers face. And that is why Jesus prays on our behalf to God, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one."

The evil one. Who or what is the evil one that makes Jesus worried about our safety? We hear that term and we may picture a devil with horns and a pitch fork. But if we think about the evil one only in terms of a sinister figure, we will overlook the many ordinary looking, garden variety kinds of evils that threaten our wellbeing. Jesus knows that there are indeed

dangers to his precious followers that threaten not only the body but also our hearts and minds and souls. He repeatedly prays, in this prayer for our protection, that we may be one just as he and the Creator are one with each other. I don't think this prayer that we may be "one" is simply a prayer for us Christians to all get along--or a prayer that we would become some kind of Christian United Nations. I think his prayer that we would be one is prayer that we would live united, in sync, with the Way of Jesus Christ and the realm of God. Just as Jesus lives in complete harmony, completely in sync with God's realm, so Jesus prays that we would be united, one, with the realm of God and the way of Jesus Christ.

But he knows the dangers that exist in the world that threaten to put us out of sync with God's realm--all the circumstances and situations and cultural trends that could threaten our unity with God's way. Judas succumbed to such dangers. And Jesus knows we too are vulnerable.

The dangers come in all kinds of forms and shapes, and often we don't see them as dangers. We suffer some kind of tragedy or a grave loss. Maybe a wrong was done to us. And as painful as that may be, what is worse is what could happen within. Our hearts could grow hard. We could refuse to love, or to have compassion, or to forgive. And Jesus prays, O Lord, protect them from the evil one.

Or we become overpowered by the greed around us. There is a socially acceptable kind of greed that permeates our society. Our children grow up breathing in this kind of greed--and even we adults cannot quite resist the cultural trend in which the practice of acquisition becomes our life's purpose rather than living the way of Jesus Christ. It's not that we set out to be greedy. It's just that we live in a culture of "more": of wanting more, getting more, being offered all the time "more." And Jesus prays, O Lord, protect them from the evil one.

Or we succumb to the tribalism that divides people from one another as we each find our own affinity groups and look with suspicion on everyone else. And our world becomes white vs. black, Republican vs. Democrat, citizen vs. immigrant, women vs. men, Christian vs. Muslim, white collar vs. working class. And Jesus prays, O Lord, protect them from the evil one.

Or we accept that violence and militarism are the only ways we can ensure our safety, get our way, and resolve our conflicts. And so children killed by bombs or missiles are regarded with regret as "collateral damage." And Jesus prays, O Lord, protect them from the evil one.

Or we are overcome by the stress that our families or society places upon us to succeed, to get good grades, to get into a good school, to make good money, to achieve. Or our own ambitions turn our lives into an ever escalating frenzy of activity and pressure. And Jesus prays, O Lord, protect them from the evil one.

Jesus calls his followers to live in the world, to be engaged in this world, but to live distinctly different from that world. But when we come to resemble that world, when the values we embrace, the goals we set for ourselves, when the habits we follow, look just like the rest of the world, when our institutions look just like all the other institutions of the world, then we contradict the life to which Christ calls us. And Jesus prays, O Lord, protect them from the evil one.

This is Jesus' prayer for traveling mercies as he sends us his vulnerable followers into the world. He prays for our protection. He prays that we might not succumb to the dangers that threaten our hearts and souls. He prays because he loves us and cares about our welfare and because he needs us to be his witnesses to what is really a very alien gospel in this world: a gospel of grace, of compassion, of justice, of peace, of joy, of simplicity.

Jesus is praying for you. He is praying for your protection as you travel through this world. What do you need Jesus to pray for right now? As you are engaged in the world God loves but also a world that is often hard and painful, what do you want Jesus to pray for? Is it patience in your relationships with your spouse or your children? Is it courage to stand up to something wrong at work? Is it the gift of hope when you feel that you might be on the verge of hopelessness? Is it the ability to forgive someone who has deeply wounded you? In this silence I invite you to consider a prayer you need from Jesus on your behalf as you strive to live the life of faith in a difficult world.

(silence)

As we make our way through this world, may God's traveling mercies go with us.