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Easter 7B
Peace, Seattle
May 13, 2018
John 17:6-19

WALKING THE SLACKLINE

It's called SLACKLINING, and it traces its origins to the 1980's in Yosemite National Park when a couple of rock climbers with time on their hands rigged a long piece of tubular webbing (a "slackling") between two trees to make balancing on it an extra dynamic experience.[1]

From that simple beginning, SLACKLINING experienced slow and then explosive growth in the last 30 years on its way to becoming a new sport, to the point where in recent years in Western Washington, it has not been uncommon to see slackliners setting up lines in parks and on campuses across the state.

One enterprising slackliner, Jaan Roose of Estonia, has made a life for himself traveling the world doing daredevil stunts on slacklines stretched across spectacular landscapes and sharing photos and videos of his feats. Crowned World Champion in 2016, Roose and a growing cadre of elite slackliners have become so skilled that they can hurl themselves into the air off the ropes, doing somersaults and twists like high-flying aerialists, and land back on the rope without losing balance, without falling.[2]

But whether the line you're on is suspended 2 feet above the ground or 2,000 feet up, the principle in slacklining remains the same: **Using intense concentration to stay balanced on an unstable line anchored between two fixed points.**

Friends, did you catch Jesus' slackline prayer in today's gospel?

Suspended between his FATHER and THE WORLD, Jesus takes to the slackline one more time to show his friends what's at stake and how they—how we—can keep our balance.

He prays that we may be one with God and one another;
He prays that we may be protected from the distractions of the evil one;
He prays that we may experience the fullness of joy he offers;
and he prays that we may complete the mission that began with him.

And we need his prayers, because, as Jesus reminds us, the world is hostile to the truth and to those who care about the truth—even when that truth is meant to bring life to the world.

"THE WORLD."

In chapter 17 alone there are 18 references to THE WORLD. ("Kosmos" in the Greek.)
And 13 of them our packed into today's reading—with a variety of prepositions attached.
There's…

- from the world
- on behalf of the world
- in the world
- of the world
- to the world
- out of the world

[1] The origins of Slacklining are many and difficult to trace. A good brief synopsis of origins can be found here: https://www.slackline-tools.com/know-how/history/
[2] You can find video of the world championship slacklining competition here: http://estonianworld.com/life/estonian-jaan-roose-wins-slacklining-competition-italy/

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- into the world

Just how are we to understand this "WORLD" of which John and Jesus speak?

For John the gospel writer, "the world" doesn't refer to the order of creation, nor does it refer to this sphere in which we live our lives. Instead, John uses the term theologically:

> "The world" is that reality created by humans who refuse God, who choose the false structures of DEATH over the God-given life. And while that world may masquerade as orderly, in truth it invariably brings chaos.[3]

In that sense, then, we are not of this world—not because we do not belong here in creation, but because we have chosen to live by God's light and life, instead of being captive to the false constructs of a lesser realm.

The Gospel's use of the term "world" forces us to see that (A) there is creation, which is God's reality for us, and (B) there is "the world," which is our flawed human self-construction of reality. God's creation flows from God's love; while the world is about power and death."[4]

When John, in the prologue to his gospel, writes: THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND LIVED AMONG US, he's saying that, in Jesus, God ventured out onto the slackline strung between the TRUTH OF the Father and the MASQUERADE of the World; between LIFE and DEATH. And while he walked that line, he never lost his balance. He remained IN but not OF the world.

Now, as Jesus prepares to complete his mission and return to the Father, he asks for protection for his apprentices. He asks for balance, for fortitude, for wisdom, so that they will be able to stay true amid the treacheries and distractions the World sends their way. So that they will be able to resist the chaos which—if it captured their attention—would throw them off balance and send them reeling.

YOU DO NOT BELONG TO THAT WORLD, Jesus tells them and us.

YOU BELONG TO THIS CREATION, YES, THIS WONDROUS ORDER THAT GOD CALLED GOOD, BUT YOU DO NOT BELONG TO THE CHAOTIC STRUCTURES OF THE WORLD THAT PROMISE LIFE BUT CAN ONLY DELIVER DEATH.

WHEN JESUS SPEAKS OF ETERNAL LIFE IN JOHN, he's not talking "pie in the sky by and by." He's not talking about a life entirely separate from this mortal existence, or about a life that becomes realized only after this life is over.

LIFE with a capital "L", ETERNAL LIFE in John's gospel, is fullness of life in God and with God—right now. For it comes with knowing and trusting the truth that God is indeed completely and unreservedly for us and with us in Jesus. This indeed is the truth that sets us free.

The world of which Jesus speaks in today's gospel is a world that hates life, chooses death, and lies. It lives in darkness, not in light, and is a hostile place.

And yet, in spite of this, Jesus will neither abandon his community nor the world. Instead, he prays "HOLY FATHER, PROTECT THEM IN YOUR NAME THAT YOU HAVE GIVEN ME, SO THAT THEY MAY BE ONE, AS WE ARE ONE."

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[3] Bernard B. Scott, New Proclamation B, 2006. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), page 72.
[4] Ibid.

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The world may be a hostile place. But following Jesus is not about escaping the world and going to some other realm.

No. AS YOU HAVE SENT ME INTO THE WORLD, Jesus prays, SO I HAVE SENT THEM INTO THE WORLD." **Into the world…the preposition MATTERS!**

The hope we have in Christ Jesus is not grounded in the world, it doesn't take its marching orders from the world, nor is it found in any human ideology no matter how attractive it may seem.

Rather, our hope is grounded in God's love and in God's will for us and for this world—and God's will is that we might have life abundant.

Why? FOR "GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD!" YES! In spite of its shamelessness; in spite of its chaos, its violence and despair; in spite of its hateful rhetoric and corrupt actions, GOD LOVES THE WORLD!

To suggest that the world God loves is something other than the broken one we know, is to gravely underestimate God and God's love and to misread the whole thrust of the Jesus story.[5]

If the broken world isn't the one that is so beloved, then the lifting up of the Son on the cross makes no sense.

Jesus need not die if he's only in the world for the sake of the people who like him.
And those whom Jesus calls his own will not be in danger if the plan is for them to go to some place away from the world, to bear fruit in happy isolation.[6]

The reason that we are called to mirror the union of the Father and Son and carry the love of God and Jesus with us as we venture out onto the slackline is precisely because God loves this world and wants it to know that love.[7] And you and I have been chosen for the task. To venture out onto the slackline. To be messengers of God's love—to be God-bearers.

To live in the world but not be of the world is to walk that slackline as Jesus walked it.

To learn to ignore the hype, the tweets, the distractions, the pumped up drama of voices and headlines that only mirror the duplicity of the world, and, instead, to keep our eyes trained on him, to keep our feet on his path, and thereby maintain our balance.

Jesus' whole life, you see, is a study in how to keep balance while venturing out into the world with love. And you know what? **He'll never leave us out there alone.**

He said it this way, I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANED.

As Christ returns to the Father, he sends another—the Advocate, the Paraclete, the Spirit—to walk by our side; to hold our hand and keep us steady. And not only that—he gives us one another and a meal to share; a meal which reminds us that he will always be with us, that he will never leave or forsake us. That we belong to him.

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[5] Meda Stamper, in Working Preacher, 2015. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2437
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

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Amen.