

“Do Not Give Up!”

Today’s Scripture is rarely used as the Text for sermons – it is not among the three year Lectionary Scripture Reading cycle. However, this Text specifically addresses some important issues for today, including significant ones in the life of this congregation.

The Reading reports part of the conversation between Jesus and his disciples during his last evening before his death. He spoke about the conflict he had with the religious authorities and his knowledge of their role in his impending death. He was concerned about the welfare of his original disciples as he faced the religious leaders’ attacks on himself and as he recognized the mistreatment followers would experience. Indeed, prior to our Reading, Jesus warned his disciples about the world’s hatred of them, especially in the future. And so, at the start of our Text, he intentionally spoke about the hardships his disciples would experience as a result of Jesus’ conflict with the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

Jesus said in **John 16:1-2**, ***“I have told you this, so that you will not give up your faith. You will be expelled from the synagogues, and the time will come when those who kill you will think that by doing this they are serving God.”*** Perhaps one of the best examples of such suffering by Christians is found in Acts 7:54-8:1, which reported the stoning to death of Stephen by the Sanhedrin.

Jesus’ warning in verse 2 continues to be true even today. There are religious extremists, who think killing followers of Jesus Christ is “serving God” – ISIL in Syria and Iraq and even Domestic Terrorists – including self-proclaimed Christians, who murder supposedly to protect life. Thinking the persecution of others is serving God is clearly challenged by Jesus. He said in **verses 3-4a**, ***“People will do these things to you because they have not known either the Father or me. But I have told you this, so that when the time comes for them to do these things, you will remember what I told you.”*** Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, has the policy that it is unacceptable for any of us to attempt to force anyone to follow our individual beliefs.

Jesus explained in **verses 4b-7**, ***“I did not tell you these things at the beginning, for I was with you. But now I am going to Him Who sent me, yet none of you asks me where I am going. And now that I have told you, your hearts are full of sadness. But I am telling you the Truth: it is better for you that I go away, because if I do not go, the Helper will not come to you. But if I do go away, then I will send him to you.”*** The Gift of the Holy Spirit – “the Helper” is enormously important to our lives as Christians. The Spirit enables, empowers, and guides us, especially as we face attacks from supposed religious folks. God’s Holy Spirit also provides us the strength to persevere in our Faith Relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Jesus further indicated the Holy Spirit would continue to battle false religious leaders in **verses 8-11**, ***“And when he comes, he will prove to the people of the world that they are wrong about sin and about what is right and about God’s judgment. They are wrong about sin, because they do not believe in me; they are wrong about what is right, because I am going to the Father and you will not see me anymore; and they are wrong about judgment, because the ruler of this world has already been judged.”*** Unfortunately, there are two types of negative influences, which are frequently manifested among self-professing Christians. One is giving into the temptation to be self-centered and controlled by one’s personal desires for wealth, power, and self-gratification at the expense of others.

The other temptation, unfortunately, had already appeared among the original disciples. They often wanted to side with the Pharisees and Legalistic Religious Leaders against Jesus, so they could lord it over everyone else. Earlier in the evening, Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and explained he did it to

be an example for how they should serve one another. **I understand Jesus' comments in verses 8-9, "they are wrong about sin and about what is right and about God's judgment. They are wrong about sin, because they do not believe in me" – I understand those statements were directed against the Pharisees and their legalistic allies.** Those religious leaders were very self-serving in contrast and conflict with Jesus, who is the self-giving agape love of God. Trying to keep "sinners" out of God's People is not what God wants but what we humans do to enhance our own power and prestige. This radical difference between the way of Jesus and the way of the Pharisees and the other legalists provided much of their motivation for manipulating his capture, trial, and death.

Knowing his followers would suffer at the hands of the Pharisees and the Religious Establishment, Jesus sought to encourage the disciples in **verse 20, "I am telling you the truth: you will cry and weep, but the world will be glad; you will be sad, but your sadness will turn into gladness."** Jesus bolstered the original disciples by telling them in **verse 27, "... the Father Himself loves you. He loves you because you love me and have believed that I came from God."**

In this Scripture, we see Jesus revealed how the legalistic religious leadership not only hated him but would also bring suffering to his followers. **He reminded us his death and the conflict the disciples would experience at the hands of the Jewish religious leadership highlight and contrast God's message through Jesus and the claims of the legalist.** So, if we assume Jesus, the Son of God, was and is correct when he calls his disciples from all times and places to follow his way of life, instead of the self-centered and self-serving life of the religious elite, then we are called to believe in Jesus Christ and live his way – Agape Love – the way of service and radical hospitality.

Next Sunday is Pentecost, the celebration of the reception of the Gift of the Holy Spirit, and it is our Personal Dedication Sunday! The Holy Spirit enables you and me to have many gifts and abilities, which we are to use as we follow Jesus' way of service – living self-giving agape love. **Further, both our Personal Dedication Program and our Digital Church Sign Capital Campaign have the theme "Let Our Light Shine!"** That slogan reminds us we are to let God's Self-Giving Agape Love show forth from us, so it invites and welcomes all people to receive the benefits of living in God's Selfless Love. Next Sunday, members and friends will be given the opportunity to complete their Personal Dedication Booklets and then bring them forward to the Altar for Dedication. In those booklets, each of us are asked to indicate how we respond to our Loving God by giving back to our Divine Parent through service out our time, talents or skills, and energy. Between now and when you bring your completed booklet forward next Sunday, you are encouraged to prayerfully consider the ways you can be of service. While you are doing that, please be aware **Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, especially needs more members and friends volunteering to do these specific services:**

- ▶ **Teach Sunday School during the School Year.**
- ▶ **Prepare and run PowerPoint presentations for our Worship Celebrations.**
- ▶ **Lead Worship Celebrations as a Lay Liturgical Leader.**
- ▶ **Volunteer to be elected or appointed to serve on the Board of Deacons or on the Board of Trustees.**

Finally, after sharing how the faithful will suffer oppression because those allied with selfishness and self-serving are against Jesus and his way, our Lord and Savior concluded his words of encouragement and call, saying in **verse 33, "I have told you this so that you will have peace by being united to me. The world will make you suffer. But be brave! I have defeated the world!"** Amen.