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Life in the Middle

I became a Christian when I was 14. On Sept 25, 1976, I went forward in response to an invitation to receive Christ as my personal Lord and Savior in an American Baptist Church in Casper, WY. I had recently started attending this church at the invitation of a friend. In a few short weeks, it had become evident to me that there was something special about this group of individuals. While I doubt I could articulate it at the time, it was the sense of community and caring without having to "prove" myself that drew me in.

It was also the message. The astonishing Good News of the Gospel. The acceptance and forgiveness by Christ served as a beacon that captured my passion and energy. It was almost like a magnetic force—I was so attracted to this good news…and to this community. The news of Christ's offering allowed an "escape" from a family which seemed so together on the outside but was ravaged by dysfunction on the inside. Hallelujah – the words of Jesus, and His embodiment in the people in this church, especially my Sunday school teacher, Mr. Riedel, offered me a Life Line. I tenaciously clung to this Line through a confusing time of High School - when outside success and achievements – whether academic or athletic – were never enough to replace the chaos and emptiness in my family.

In some of the first months I was a Christian, I was reading John, and came to Chapter 17. The power of this prayer that Jesus prayed for the disciples was a lightening rod for me. In fact, I was so struck by it, that I memorized this chapter. I wanted these words to always be with me. Jesus was praying for ME…offering a Life Line.

So, you might be wondering what this has to do with "life in the middle"? What is the middle? Is this nearly 50 yo woman going to talk about midlife? Is it the middle of a career? Is it the middle of recovering from a significant challenge to

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my ability to work?…(as an aside…be careful when you sign up to do a sermon! I remember when Michael signed up for a sermon, he and Audrey had a boating incident that was really scary-and that supplied material for his sermon on suffering. I signed up for this and about a month later, ended up with a recurrence of my eye infection that has been the most serious I've had – and this time of medical leave and uncertainity has no doubt shaped this sermon…) Anyway…what is the "middle". Well, for the purposes of this sermon, I am thinking of this middle in two ways – I am a visual person – so 1): vertically – it is between times that are real highs where things are too good to be true…, or low's—those prickly times that definitely can be very spiritual—but really, most of the time is spent between these two, in the middle. Here is the day in and day out tasks, jobs and gatherings, school. Another way I am visualizing the middle here is horizontally, where one can mark the "start" of time as becoming a Christian, and the finish line is Heaven - or the Best Party Ever – which is how I think of Heaven when I will get to see my Grandpa, and I get to meet God and finally ask those questions like: "really, what WERE you thinking with this free will stuff?"…so, life in the middle is where most of us are, every day, doing our day to day stuff—neither euphoric or devastated, but certainly alive and not yet at our final celebration that will last for eternity. The middle exists in any geographic location. Whether we lived in Kenya or Nicaragua working as physicians, or in Switzerland – sure, we had wonderful amazing opportunities for the weekends off. But, the majority of the time was spent getting up, going to work – sometimes doing work tasks one liked, sometimes not…grocery shopping, making dinner, doing laundry…my point is that no matter where we are living, the majority of the time we spend is "in the middle". The middle can seem endless. And sometimes, in the middle, it can be really hard to maintain hope. We long for a time where we won't have the natural disaster of the week, or the suffering of innocent civilians, or the ethnic or gender hate that we see/hear/feel engulfing us. Sometimes, our soul weeps, and we just ache, awaiting a passage through this middle time.

Well, Okay, so if that is the middle –why tie it in with John 17?

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Christ, when praying for his disciples is not saying to "take me out of the world". He is saying to stay in the world. (vs. 15 "my prayer is not that you would take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one…." Then in vs. 18 "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.")..things may not always be going well, but Jesus says …stay there. So, what does John 17 teach us about how to "stay in this world"? I know this passage is rich with insights, but I will talk about two things that stand out to me : these are Escape and Community …and actually, these can go together.

First – let me talk about "escape". Throughout the gospels, when Jesus was being thronged by people, he would escape by himself to pray. Here, in this passage, he is the garden, the night before his greatest act of servanthood, and he "escaped" by himself. There are many other accounts of Jesus removing Himself to solitude. This is one lesson about how to do life in the middle – to "escape" by oneself—but what is the purpose of that escape? **It is to draw near to the giver of purpose and courage.**

It is not enough just to escape to our "busyness", our "list". This is so tempting—especially for me, in fact, in our culture, we almost worship "busyness" and "productivity". It is also not just to escape by altering reality with alcohol or drugs—another all too common means of avoiding being "in the world". In John 17, Jesus is definitely "in the world" at this moment – so in the world that he knows he is about to face his death. We can learn from his coping strategy for being "in the world" demonstrated in the seeking of solitude for the purpose of communing with God.

Another way to sustain life in the middle is actually to escape to the "mountain top". We all need mountain top experiences. By this, I mean the type of experience that is a "real high", often by getting away with a community of believers. In these situations, it is of value to "move out of the middle" to allow a clarity of focus that embodies the words "sanctify them with thy Truth. Thy Word is truth". I think most of us have had them—at least I hope so. Mine came every summer for one week when our church had a backpacking trip that literally occurred on the mountain. But my most sustaining "mountain top" experience,

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which had a profound impact on my life occurred between my junior and senior year of college, working a summer at Buck Creek Camp, a camp then owned by the Presbytery of Seattle near Mt. Rainier by Crystal Mountain. This was my first exposure to the state of Washington, and to Presbyterians. Christian camp may seem like it is for the campers. But really, I'll let you in on a little secret – really it is for the staff! The summer of 1982 rocked my world. Here, Christ met us staff members, 14 individuals, and His Presence and the Spirit propelled us together in a way that would equip all of us to leave this mountain and move back into the world, forever different. One of our staff had just returned from life in Brazil in a poor, rural community. Through her stories and struggles to re-acclimate to life in the US, all of us travelled there in a sense. We explored liberation theology, the idea of God being there for the poor and voiceless. Justice. Mercy. The Sermon on the Mount in this context. It rocked my theology, and helped cement my desire to work with the dis-enfranchised as we pondered the truth of "If you want to meet Christ, you go to the poor and suffering." It Created life long friendships that are still with me. This was a "cloistered" type experience -----but for the purpose of preparing us to go back to our respective callings and be able to be Christ "in the middle".

Youth events can be powerful "mountain top experiences". Conor had a wonderful opportunity while we were in Geneva in 2009 to experience Christ through a Youth Across Europe Retreat, where he joined Christian youth from many countries and nationalities, and I think, experienced the presence of God in a profound way. Last summer, Buckley and I were able to pick up a few of our youth as they returned from Triennium – on the way home from the airport, one could hear their stories. Their passion was palpable and it was crystal clear to Buckley and I that they had had a "mountain top" experience that would forever leave the Holy Spirit's mark on them. In fact, I think as adults in a church, we have a responsibility to try to supply these opportunities for our youth.

It is human nature to want these mountain top experiences to last. Sometimes, I think we get mixed up and think these pinnacles in our lives should be the norm. We yearn for them—that is okay. We should. Perhaps it is the Holy Spirit in us that is seeking them. However, in verse 15 of John 17, Christ's prayer is "not that

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you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. " These "mountain top experiences" serve to saturate the sponges of our spirits so that we can sustain "life in the middle". There was a song that we sang in the summer of 1982 at Buck Creek Camp that has stayed with me for 29 years and speaks to this need to move off of the "mountain top". The lyrics were:

> "I was wondering if you had been to the mountain? Looked at the valley below? Did you see all those roads tangled down in the valley, did you know which way to go? Well, the mountain streams run pure and clear, and I wish to my soul I could always be here. But there's a reason for living way down in the valley that only the mountains know".

Now I want to move to a second theme of this passage for how to do life in the middle: community. In John chapter 17, vs. 20-23 Jesus says: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message. (is that cool or what…Jesus prayed for you and me individually hours before his crucifixion) that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them, even as you have loved me."

There are many ways to experience community. We feel it when we join with others for a common purpose – such as a sports team, or a task force, or a summit on global health – in that we are joining with others who have a common vision and passion, and the joining together of these common passions gives us energy.

However, I think "one ness" described in this passage is actually a little more radical than the oneness from a sports team, or a task force. In a commentary on John by Earl Palmer, he says that: "Jesus is describing the oneness that results from a shared experience of the presence of God (glory) in the lives of his people

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in the world. " {REPEAT THIS} In fact, I think the unity that follows from a communal experience of the presence of the glory of God is frequently a key factor that contributes greatly to the power of our mountain top experiences. In this prayer, I feel Christ is telling us that community, and the communal experience of the presence of God, are a necessary condition for doing "life in the middle".

Let's look again at vs. 21-"that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me". Again, as Earl Palmer elaborates, in this prayer, Jesus says that as the disciples display that solidarity toward the world, then the world will know God through this solidarity." Hence, the Christian strategy is not portrayed in terms of rugged individualism. There are no heroes that can go it alone. As we supremely need Jesus Christ, we will also need each other. Christ gives the gift of the Holy Spirit to abide in us, and with us, on the journey, and he gives us each other. This means that the strategy for "life in the middle" is to be a "holy colony". Of men and women. In my experience, looking for this "holy colony" in multiple aspects of my life has been a vital strategy to try to do "life in the middle". Not just Sunday, but at work, or on the sports sidelines. I hope that those of us who were Christians in our youth, and those of us who are youth, know the benefit of having a "holy colony" at school, or on teams, or in the band --a community of individuals to build solidarity around Christ—again, the Christian strategy is not portrayed in terms of rugged individualism. There are no heroes who can go it alone. As we Christians together experience the reality of the love of Christ in the **real** situations of life, in the good and the bad, the joys and the tragedies, -- as we share this creative love with those around us by this modeling of the love of Christ, then the world is drawn to consider the meaning of God's love.

But, Earl Palmer cautions, "we need to be aware that the **mission** or JOB of the church is not the basis for our solidarity, our oneness. It is our task, what we do, but "doing church" cannot be our motivation or source of community. If we move too far toward task orientation in the church, a result can be that we believers come to relate to each other on the basis of the giftedness of each

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believer, and gradually the worth of the brother/sister is shifted toward the false ground of being defined by accomplishments." Jesus prays "I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one". Christ's love is the source of the oneness, the community, and it is from Christ we derive the task. It is this radical idea– that of NEEDING Christ and the solidarity that comes from this that allows us to experience community that is not based on accomplishments or tasks, but that of experiencing Christ together. This is Christ's prayer and vision for us.

So really, when I reflect on the way that I came to Jesus through the Life Line I was offered at First Baptist Church, and when I think of life changing experiences, such as my summer at Buck Creek Camp, – well these embody the plan Jesus laid out here in John 17. The Life line here is community. Need community. Need each other, and the SOLE basis is Jesus, not accomplishments. We are, indeed, called to live , "in the world" , and we are to live out this "middle time" together.

Thanks be to God.