

A week or so ago there was a fascinating editorial in the NY Times by David Brooks called "They Had It Made." Brooks was commenting on a study of the Harvard class of 1942, a class that included JFK.

As these young men were sent into the world, a sociologist tracked and studied them throughout their entire lives. What would come of the world's elite? Does early worldly advantage mean later worldly accomplishment? As Brooks says, "*by any normal measure, they had it made. They tended to be bright, polished, affluent and ambitious. They had the benefit of the world's most prestigious university.*"

And yet - and you can probably guess what's coming - "*the categories of journalism and the stereotypes of normal conversation are paltry when it comes to predicting a life course. Their lives played out in ways that would defy any imagination save Dostoyevsky's. A third of the men would suffer at least one bout of mental illness. Alcoholism would be a running plague.*"

These men, by the world's standards, had everything that the world could offer to guarantee happiness and so called success. And yet, it seems that the world could not deliver on its promises.

In this morning's gospel, we see another group of men being sent into the world. Jesus prays for his disciples, whom he has "*sent into the world.*" He prays for their life's course. He prays for them because He is not naïve about what the disciples will find in the world. He says that the "*world will hate them, because they are not of this world.*"

What does Jesus mean by "world" here? He means the theater of life that is opposed to or devoid of the grace of God. He means the way of living, sometimes called "the flesh" rather than "spirit", "darkness" rather than "light."

You know the world, of course. The world is a meritocracy. If you can prove your mettle, then you will be rewarded. The world operates on the Darwinian assumption that the strong, or smart, or beautiful, survive. Or to use, Brooks' language, the bright, polished, affluent and ambitious have it made. In the world, you are a literally a *persona non grata*, that is, a person without grace.

This is how the world operates, but as we've seen the world cannot guarantee its spoils even to those who play by its rules. Because the basic rule of those who live in the world is "do whatever makes me happy: look out for number one."

That is common parlance for the language of original sin spoken by the serpent to Adam and Eve in the Garden: eat this fruit and "you will be like God." Look out for yourself, secure your own good.

This is why the world is full of men who leave their wives, when their wives lose their luster. This is why the world is full of women who try desperately to control their husbands and attempt to find their worth in the successes of their children – children who are also expertly managed and controlled, until the children are old enough to move far, far away. This is why the world is full of adult children more interested in their inheritance than their aging parents.

This is why the world is filled with friends who betray friends. This is why someone in your office will look you right in the eye, full of warm feeling and promise, tell you one thing and then do the exact opposite. This is why your roommate listens to you talk about your boyfriend and then hooks up with the very same guy later that night at South Street.

This is why corporations will get theirs at the expense of the powerless or at the cost of God's creation. This is why one race excludes and demonizes another race, why those who govern abuse their power, why "the rich stay healthy and the sick stay poor".

It is the way of the world. It is what naturally happens when each person believes that he or she is like God. When everyone is looking out for number one, there will be obvious conflict.

Jesus says that his disciples – that would also include you and me – are not of this world, just as He is not of this world. The way of the world is not to be our way. We have a different way to live.

And yet, we are not taken out of the world ("I do not ask you to take them out of the world"); in fact, just the opposite - we are sent into the world ("As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.") This is why I tend to question monastic living – isolated Christian communities, hemmed off from the world.

Although we are not of the world, we are to be in the world, as light and salt. You are the salt of the earth, Jesus says. The word "salt" is associated with health. It comes from the Roman god of health named Salus. Salus is the origin of "salutary" and "salute" – originally wishes for good health. (I learned that from Hilde Lee, in the Progress's Food Section!!)

So, as disciples, you and I are sent into a dark and sick world to bring life and health. And yet, there should be a tension you are feeling right now. The problem is that even for believers, followers of Jesus, the way of the world creeps in and infects us. Churches, sadly, are filled with people – both in the pew and the pulpit – who at times look out only for number one. We who have been sent into the world have in many ways adopted the way of the world.

This should not surprise Bible readers. The bible is filled with "heroes" who fail and fall. In the words of one hit wonder Howie Day in the song Collide, "*even the best*

fall down sometime, even the wrong words seem to rhyme." If pop songs don't do it for you, try the Apostle Paul. *"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate...for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep doing."* How did Paul tap my phone lines?

So it appears that even we, who have been given new life in Jesus Christ, we who like the Harvard Class of 42 have been given every spiritual privilege run aground on trouble and turmoil in this world that we are in but not of. The same evil one who made the false promise to Adam and Eve is still on the loose today.

So, where is our help? Well, you'll note in the gospel passage, Jesus prays, *"I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one."* We pray this in the Lord's Prayer – deliver us from evil. Or in the words of the translation of our 6th grade Sunday School, *"please keep us away from sin and evil."*

Not only does Jesus pray for us, but as the text says, He sanctifies us in His truth. We are given true and right ways to deal with the ways of the world. These true ways set us apart from the world into which we've been sent. What are these ways? There are many that we learn about in God's Word – which is "truth."

For example, when we sin, we confess our sin and receive forgiveness from God. When we betray another brother, we ask for forgiveness. And in return, the betrayed brother forgives absolutely and unconditionally. Christian relationships aren't without trouble, but we hope that there can be an elasticity to them – stretched but not broken. As bumper sticker rightly says, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." And we hope that our example forgiving relationships will be salt for those in the world.

But, finally, there will be places we fail. As the prayer book says, "there is no health in us." So the best way to be salt and health in the world to which you've been sent is this: point to your Savior. In Him is all Health – Health enough for the world. And God so loved the world that He sent His own Son to die on a cross and to save the world in all its darkness and betrayal and sin.

I'm always looking for new cultural ways to talk about the saving cross of Christ for the world. A poem in the recent New Yorker speaks of *"boats lost in the fog, adrift in windless latitudes, the charts useless, the water gone."* (Lawrence Raab) It is a good description of the world, *"where the stereotypes of normal conversation are paltry when it comes to predicting a life's course."*

And yet, the poem ends with hope – *"the wind rises, the tattered sails billow, and the air grows sweeter. A green island appears, everyone is saved."* Or to use the language of the Good Friday Hymn, *"there is a green hill far away, outside a city wall where our dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all."* Amen.