

Date: Sunday July 26, 2009

Scripture: John 6:1-21

Title: "Observations of the Church"

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus cares for others in a variety of ways. We are called to care in his name and in his ways.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): We are called by God to be God's church and to live as the Body of Christ. To be known and called by God is good news. Let us rejoice.

(Remember, it's all about God!)

The prayer meeting was almost over. The pastor decided he would have one of the attendees lead the closing prayer. He said to Mr. Jones, "Would you lead us in prayer?" There was silence. Mr. Jones's eyes were closed, but he was sleeping not praying. Mrs. Jones seeing what was happening nudged her husband with her elbow. She got his attention. "Lead," she exclaimed! "Lead," Mr. Jones asked? "Why I just dealt" (Flynn).

Mr. Jones was confused. He's not alone. There is much confusion in our world today. Why even art museums appear to be confused. "What do art museums want?" That's how a *New York Times* article by Roberta Smith began a few years ago. She continued, "Art museums are driven by the desire to be financially successful. They are mounting exhibitions that are terminally afflicted by what looks like a certifiable fear of art. They often behave less and less like museums. They represent the failure, for one reason or another, to simply let art be art, to honor its specialness and mysteries, and allow it to work its effect. One gets

the feeling that for many people in charge of museums and exhibitions these days, art is not enough” (Pulpit Resource).

Art museums are not alone. What does the church want? The search for the answer to that question might follow closely the soul searching self-examination of a venerable institution such as the art museum. You see, the identity of the art museum is at stake. They are not free from the crunch of the economic downturn or the demand of 21st Century marketing requirements. Attendance has waned, expenses are up, and their future is in question. They are trying to find more money and people. The same can be said for the church. In the course of our lifetime, for whatever reasons, it has become unclear what the church wants and just what exactly the church is. There is confusion. Now, I’m not speaking so much about our faith community here, but about the larger church throughout the world, of which, of course, we are a part. So, what gnaws at the larger church we must be aware of and it seems that often the church wants to be anything and everything but the church. Much of what the church does and doesn’t do speaks of a fear of Jesus as our crucified and risen Lord. How many times I have had conversations with people about their fear of going out and talking to others about Jesus. I have said before the struggle of the church is not so much in trying to follow Jesus, but in the effort it takes to not follow Jesus.

According to Reverend Dale Rosenberger, the church appears to want to impress the world more and more with stats and appearance rather than simply working at fulfilling the mission that God calls us to embrace. Mega churches call

former sports arenas home, some churches only want to be ahead of the curve social agencies, often swollen budgets get all the attention and effort in the church, or the label of success is applied to those churches that have the stampeding of the masses. In a celebrity mad culture many local parishes seek to be celebrity churches.

Dare I say churches in this time seem to be embarrassed to proclaim Christ's reign and are too awkward to unabashedly glorify God. Neither of those acts answer the question that is more impressive to us and to which we are obsessed: what is in it for me? Over the course of time we have lost the ability to allow the sacred gospel mysteries entrusted to us to do their work through the witness of our word and deed.

I have the feeling at times that for many involved with the church, the God of the cross is not enough. Questions of immediate relevance take precedence over the longer view of enacting the reign of God. We forget to actually live as though God's promises in Jesus are more real than the promises we find in this advertising age. We don't allow the Holy Spirit to enfold the results that need to be enfolded. Too often we want to be anything, anything, but the church of Jesus Christ (Rosenberger). The church is confused and has a sort of identity crises. We want to find our place in the world as the church, but we don't always want it to be the place where we are supposed to be as called by God.

Here's a kind of graphic example of the challenge the church is up against as it seek to find its place in the world today. Author Urban Holmes in his book, The Future Shape of Ministry, complained about the way the contemporary American

church had become too help conscious. What he means by that statement is that the church often wants to help in ways it is not needed or is not very good at simply to say it is helping. Holmes reported seeing an announcement in a church bulletin. The announcement read: “As some of you know, before becoming pastor your pastor was a lab technician. Diabetes is a terrible illness striking down thousands of people a year. Many of you may have diabetes and not know it. Therefore, next Sunday, if you would bring a small bottle with a sample of your urine to church, your pastor will be happy to run a free diabetes test.” Signed, your pastor (Pulpit Resource). Now make note, I was in marketing, not lab work. And while I know that our faith community, especially with our outstanding parish nurse on staff, can bring helpful information to members of the congregation about a variety of ailments, illnesses, and treatments, I also know that we don’t need to be running urine tests. The church is called to serve in other ways – namely, as the body of Christ.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus cares for people. They want to honor him. They try to crown him king. But Jesus doesn’t go for it. Later he meets the disciples, not on a lush and pleasant Galilean hillside, but in a dark, threatening storm. What does that say about Jesus, the people that follow him and will follow him, and the church as the Body of Christ?

Where, at the very least, it tells us this. In the middle of that storm, and hear those words, Jesus is in the middle of a storm, John says that in the middle of the storm the disciples “saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and

they were terrified (v.19). Now do you imagine they were terrified because they saw Jesus walking on the water like some sort of ghost, or were they terrified because Jesus was coming near them and the boat. It can be, according to scripture, “a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God” (Hebrews 10:31). It may be fearful when Jesus Christ gets close; fearful as we realize that Jesus is not our errand boy, Jesus is not our caregiver, and Jesus may not even be our compassionate healer. Jesus Christ is Lord (Willimon) and is to be served.

But the church struggles with that idea. We forget that the church is not about us, it is all about Jesus. According to theologian Eugene Peterson, the operating Biblical metaphor regarding worship is sacrifice – Jesus sets that example. Sacrifice goes against the American way. The major American innovation in the congregation is to turn it into a consumer enterprise. We have developed a culture of acquisition, an economy that is dependent on wanting and requiring more. We have a huge marketing industry designed to stir up appetites we didn’t even know we had. We always want more. It hasn’t taken long for some churches and pastors to develop as consumer congregations. If we are a nation of consumers, and we are, then obviously the quickest and most effective way to get people into church is to identify what they want and then offer it to them. We have had some of those conversations here of which I have been a big part. But the idea with some churches is to go to any extreme to satisfy fantasies, promise the moon, recast the gospel in consumer terms, and provide entertainment, satisfaction, excitement, adventure, and problem solving. In the U.S., we are the world’s

champion consumers, so why wouldn't we have state of the art consumer churches? (Peterson). No wonder we might quake in our shoes when Jesus gets close.

So what do these observations about the church and church confusion mean to us here at Immanuel UCC in Sedalia, MO? Well we can remind ourselves on a day that we come to worship in flowery shirts that it is not about our dress, but it's about worship. We can remind ourselves that this is not a place to gather for any old worship, but that we gather here for the worship of God. We remind ourselves that we are not the church that feeds kids, but we are the church that feeds kids in the name of Jesus Christ. We remind ourselves that we are not just people that serve, but we serve as led by the Holy Spirit. On a day when we hear about our budget, income, expenses and giving, all important stuff, we can remind ourselves that it is not about how much money we have, but how equipped, prepared, and ready we are to serve others in the name of Christ. On a day that we have a new member joining our community, we remind ourselves we are not just a community, but a faith community. On a day we lift up people who are ill or facing obstacles in their lives, or are grieving, we are reminded that we pray for others and care for them not just because it is the right thing to do, but it is the way Jesus shows us to be. On this Sunday when we read a Gospel lesson, we are reminded that we are more than an organization that knows something about Christ; we are the body of Christ. On a Sunday when we are reminded of who we are as children of God, as the Body of Christ, and as ones loved and infused by the Holy Spirit, then we go forth into the world not just as church folk, but as preachers and teachers of God's good news,

sharing God's good news in a confused world that desperately needs to know God's good news. That's what we do; and the fact that we are called to do all that and more, by God, is very good news. Let there be no confusion. We are God's church and we can give thanks for that good news and for who we are as the people of God. Let us so as we pray.

Almighty,

We do give thanks for being called by you to be your church, to serve you in the ways that you know are needed. We hope the confusion the church encounters can dissipate and clarity can be our companion as we journey for you on the road of service and sharing, all in your name. This we pray, Amen.

Offering: That road of service and sharing I just mentioned leads right to this place, this time of offering. Let us give generously. The users will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, accept and bless this offering we make this day that strengthens us as a faith community committed to serving you. With thanksgiving for all gifts, we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Benediction: Good news, God's love, given to us, go forth, pass it on. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Flynn, Bernice and Leslie; Humorous Notes, Quotes, and Anecdotes; Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI; 1973.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Peterson, Eugene; "Transparent Lives"; *Christian Century*; 2003.

Rosenberger, Dale; "Who Are You to Say? Establishing Pastoral Authority in Matters of Faith"; Brazos Press: 2005.

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