

2-11-07

Open Prairie, United Church of Christ
Rev. Curran Reichert

“Saving Jesus”

Scripture Reading

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

Gospel Reading

Luke 6:17-26

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ‘Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. ‘Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. ‘But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ‘Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. ‘Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. ‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

In conversation with a friend of the church this week, I offered an explicit invitation for him to join the Adult Education class in progress here at OPUCC. “What is the name of the class he asked?” “Saving Jesus,” I replied. “Hhmm” he said standing in the doorway, “You really think he needs our help?” I had to think for a minute... “No,” I said, “perhaps not, but we need his help. Most of us have forgotten that Jesus can be helpful, that’s what this class is about.”

“Saving Jesus”... So many of us have been trying, for many years, to distance ourselves from some of the followers of Jesus, that somewhere along the way we forgot he was relevant to us at all. I might go so far as to say, a good portion of folk in this room believe that Jesus is more trouble than he’s worth. I won’t ask for a show of hands, that’s the kind of disclosure that can be embarrassing in church.

Some might say Jesus was the reason for the Crusades, tremendous death and destruction have taken place in the name of Jesus, and if the current predictions are true the next World War will be a religious one between Christians and Muslims...Saving Jesus, why isn’t Jesus saving us?

There is an interesting question, why isn’t Jesus saving us? When I was a little kid, if you went down around the corner to the local Pentecostal Bible Church and said you were “saved” you’d get a certificate for a free Ice Cream Sunday at Farrell’s. You can bet there were kids getting saved right and left. Lots of good “God fearing” people will tell you, “Jesus died to save us, and if you love Jesus you

will be saved.” They are good people, who mean well, but here is the thing, Jesus never talked about personal salvation. Nowhere in the Bible does it tell us that Jesus’ mission was about personal salvation. Jesus was interested in the corporate body, from what I can tell. He was interested in how we treat each other. He was interested in how we look after the things that have been entrusted to us by God. This passage from the Gospel of Luke tells us pretty clearly what Jesus cared about.

(Luke 6:17-26) Scripture says Jesus “came down with them and stood on a level place.” Just like we’re doing here- he stood among the people, eye to eye-not above them, not so far away from them that they couldn’t reach him, but right there with them. In fact, so close to them that they all reached out to be healed- and guess what? He healed them... all! He didn’t stop to ask if they believed or what they believed about God. He did not stop to ask if they would become his followers. He healed them, those who were hungering in so many ways, for dignity and acceptance, for wholeness and health, for forgiveness, freedom and hope. He healed them and then he said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ‘Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. ‘Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the (me.)” Blessed are you he said, blessed are you. Not some of you, but all of you.

That isn't exactly what the church has always taught is it? One of the Scholars from the DVD we are using in class, observed that God sent Jesus to save us all and what we got was the church.

So, we've got some sorting out to do, haven't we? In a fair amount of cases there is a big difference between who Jesus really was and is, and who the church paints him to be. Does Jesus need our help? I think the church needs our help, and if the church is to be the body of Christ then yes, Jesus needs our help.

Jesus needs us to figure out the difference between the real Jesus and the things we were taught to believe, the "traditional values" we just assumed were the teachings of Jesus because they came to us through the church. Jesus needs us to understand the difference, so that we are able to make healthy decisions about the things that we incorporate into the fabric of our faith, and so that we are wise enough to let go of the things that are divisive and destructive. What we find when we take the time to dig just beneath the surface, is that many of the things we were taught came from Early Church Doctrine, not from Jesus. Things like Original Sin (you all know what that is) and the Atonement (the idea that God sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins.)

For me personally, these Doctrines are not helpful anymore in fact they played a major role in keeping me disinterested in God for a long time, but once I became educated about them- learning where they came from and why they were written- then I was able to make some decisions as to whether or not they were useful to me.

I figured out that what I thought about the Doctrine of Original Sin had nothing to do with my relationship with Jesus. Well, I shouldn't say that, I often asked his forgiveness for the years I let those lousy ideas lead me to think I was less than who I am. I asked him to help me get over that terrible guilt that stems from believing that there is something inherently wrong with us. Why does saving Jesus matter...because bad theology is killing people every day.

You see, early on the church felt the need to homogenize people; people are easier to control if they all believe the same thing. So the Gospel was Canonized- certain books were kept in and other books were kept out. That is a very efficient way to insure that people believe the same thing. An even more effective strategy is to create Creeds, which are easy to memorize and recite on mass. How many of you know the Apostle's Creed?

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell. [See [Calvin](#)]

The third day He arose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy *catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.

Amen.¹

This is a way of remembering what we were taught to believe. It was very effective. The problem is that when the church made the shift to putting the emphasis on what we believed, it left out the part about what we are called to do. Jesus does not spend a lot of time sitting with his disciples and talking about what they should believe. As I remember it, he spends almost all of his time talking about what they/we should do!

Don't get me wrong, knowing what we believe is crucial. If we don't know what we believe and why we believe it-others will be more than happy to assign it to us, and we will be helpless to defend ourselves.

¹ The **Apostles' Creed** (Latin: *Symbolum Apostolorum*), sometimes titled **Symbol of the Apostles**, is an early statement of Christian belief, a creed or "symbol." It is widely used by a number of Christian denominations for both liturgical and catechetical purposes, most visibly by liturgical Churches of Western tradition, including the Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church, Lutheranism, the Anglican Communion, and Western Orthodoxy. It is also used by evangelical Protestant denominations such as Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists and many Baptists.

The theological specifics of this creed appear to have been originally formulated as a refutation of Gnosticism, an early heresy. This can be seen in almost every phrase. For example, the creed states that Christ was born and suffered and died on the cross. This seems to be a statement directly against the heretic teaching, which states that Christ only appeared to become man, and that he did not truly suffer and die, but only appeared as if he did. The Apostles' Creed, as well as other baptismal creeds, was esteemed as an example of the apostles' teachings, and defended the Gospel of Christ.

The name of the Creed comes from the fact that, being composed of twelve articles, it was earlier believed to have been written by the Twelve Apostles, each of whom was supposed to have contributed an article under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit after Pentecost.

Being followers of Christ is as much about knowing what we don't believe, as it is about knowing what we do believe. Why does it matter? Because it saves lives to know the difference. Look around, knowing what is worth believing has saved the lives of some of the people in this room-it saved my life. You've saved my life by knowing what's worth believing, maybe I have saved yours. You can't tell me that isn't the work of Jesus.

If you not currently planning on taking the class that is being offered twice a week for the next twelve weeks, I invite you to reconsider-not because I am such a great teacher or because the material is Gospel truth, but because the material encourages us to employ a hermeneutic of suspicion. It asks us to look at our tradition, our cultural influences, our personal experiences, and judge for ourselves what is worthy of our trust.

Friends, if we aren't doing this work as people of faith, I dare say, we have no one but ourselves to blame for the direction Christianity is taking in the name of Jesus. I remember a very specific interaction with John Thomas the President of our Denomination. Seven years ago, I was leading a West Coast Seminarians Retreat and there were a bunch of us from Pacific School of Religion who were convinced we wanted to go into "trench ministries"(social work). We weren't stupid, most of us were women half of us were queer, we knew we didn't want anything to do with Ordination or Parish Ministry.

John took one look at us and said, “ If you are so unhappy with the state of the church, you have no one to blame but yourselves. If you don’t take leadership in our churches, who will?”

Why is Jesus worth saving? Because his church is worth saving, because you and I are worth saving, and because the next person who walks through this door and has no where else to turn is worth saving. Blessed are the peacemaker, the hospitality givers, the Jesus lovers, the church savers- the Kindom of heaven is thiers.

Amen