

20170528 Sermon Ascension 2017

May 28, 2017

Luke 24:44-53

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from our Ascended Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, especially these words, **“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”**

I often hear the attack against the church to be that the church is answering questions that people aren't asking. And what's the point of this critique? The point is to accuse the church of being out of touch with the culture. It's so as to say, “If the church really cared about people, it would stop talking about what it wants to talk about and start listening to what people really want.” In fact, this sentiment found a great proponent in the church growth movement, something I have mentioned periodically and have often critiqued as I did so. You see what the church growth movement said—and this was well-intentioned, to be sure—it said, “we see that people are leaving the church, what can we do to reconnect to people who have left because they were disenfranchised with the church?” So what they determined to do was to analyze what people's “felt needs” were. They decided they would find out what people felt like they needed and they would try to draw people to church by advertising themselves as being able to satisfy those needs and more.

Now, like I said, this was well-intentioned. Of course, it's a good thing to want people to be in church. It's a good thing to want people to hear the gospel. But, when we look at the world do we see a world that wants to hear the gospel? To come back to what I was saying to start, is the world asking questions that the church is answering? Or perhaps better put, we should clarify, since the church is answering questions the world isn't asking, what questions is the world asking? Well, if we are to look around us in the lines in the grocery store, or on the television, it would seem that the world is asking how to be healthy and fit—maybe even to live forever. It would seem that the world would like to have all of the wealth and the comforts that that wealth can afford. It would seem like the world would like to find themselves well-liked, and also well entertained.

So, what do we do for the world then? Can the Church answer these questions? In a sense it seems like not, doesn't it? After all, these are all worldly things. Someone doesn't need Jesus in order to lose weight and get fit. They don't need Jesus in order to learn how to become disciplined in their life, in what they eat, drink, or even earn. They don't need

Jesus to provide people who will pour out compliments upon them. The world doesn't even need Jesus to be nicer, more giving, more socially and environmentally conscious. In fact, in light of this lack of need for Jesus, a sociologist by the name of Christian Smith said that in our culture, although most people profess to be Christian, they really could be categorized under another religion, one that he calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Smith says that you can know that by these characteristics: It teaches that God created the world, God wants people to be good, nice and fair (like taught in the Bible and most world religions) -it's moralistic, the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself -it's therapeutic, God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when needed to resolve a problem -it's deistic, Good people go to heaven when they die -and again it's moralistic.

What do you think? As you interact with people, is that a fairly accurate description of how they view God? Based on my experiences it is. So, what do we do with that? There is a real challenge here, isn't there? That is to say, did God create the world? Yes. Does God want people to be good, nice, and fair? For the most part, yes. But there's a real rub here, isn't there? Does God want you to be happy and feel good about yourself? Sure, but eternally so, not temporally. Does He want to not be involved in your life, except when there's a problem? No, He wants you to be connected with Him always. Do good people go to heaven when they die? Yes, but who is really good? Only Christ.

And yet sadly the church has bought into this in many places, God is the God who helps you to have your best life now, or makes you a better person. And how? By trying harder. By giving you sound "practical" and "relevant advice." But is this what Jesus said the church is for? No **"Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."** There we see the point. Jesus sends the Church to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. And this is hard for people to hear. Very pointedly, do you feel good about yourself when you see your sin? If you're like me you don't. And so you can see why the world doesn't want to hear this. You can see why churches perhaps don't want to push the message of sin too hard, because then people won't come to hear it.

I was rereading a favorite of my books this week called "Christless Christianity," which is by a Reformed Christian pastor and seminary teacher, by the name of Michael Horton, but still hits the nail on the head with the assessment. In it Dr. Horton says, *"Where everything is measured by our happiness rather than by God's holiness, the sense of our being sinners becomes secondary if not offensive. If we are good people who have lost our*

way but with the proper instructions and motivation can become a better person, we need only a life coach, not a redeemer.” And that’s precisely the problem in the world, isn’t it? Even within the church in many places, the problem is that we think that we need a life coach, and not a redeemer. In fact, in another place, Dr. Horton describes our culture saying, *“nobody will raise a fuss if you find Jesus helpful for your personal well-being and relationships or even if you think he was the greatest person in history—a model worthy of devotion and emulation. But start talking about the real crisis—where our best efforts are filthy rags and Jesus came to bear the condemnation of helpless sinners who place their confidence in him rather than in themselves—and people begin shifting in their seats, even in the churches.”* In other words, the Church exists for the preaching of **repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ Name**, but that doesn’t sit well.

So, how do we deal with this as the “witnesses” the Church is called to be? After all, Jesus sent His apostles out in this lesson as those witnesses, and while we say this is Jesus instituting the pastoral office, we also say that this is why the Church, pastors and laity exists. So how do we deal with this?

Well, perhaps we should start with ourselves. What keeps us—ask yourself—what keeps you from believing that this is what the church is for, this repentance and forgiveness of sins? What causes you to either stay away from hearing this, when you’re not here, or to want to when you are? What causes you distraction from the Divine Service? Perhaps those things in the world? The desire for fitness, or worldly wealth? Is that it? Possibly more entertaining things to do? That’s a common draw for the world isn’t it?

Think about what many people say, “I don’t want to go to church because it’s boring.” Right? I don’t want to go sit there for an hour when I could be sleeping after a much more exciting night of being out, or when I could go out and enjoy nature, or when I could be playing sports. Or whatever the rationale is. Think of it for yourself, do you ever get bored in church?

How do we respond? Is church sometimes boring? If I’m not preaching, do I, as a pastor ever get bored in Church? Sure. But is church boring? Well think about what happens here, especially in relation to why the Church exists. What happens as you sit in that pew on Sunday? Do you know? We talk about it in the narrative service every year. What happens is that the God of the Universe meets with us and gives to us the forgiveness of our sins. He comes and He tells us about how He has continuously saved His people throughout History, how He will save us and carry us to Himself. This God is here! He is with us, He meets us. He tenderly reaches to you in His Words and in His body and blood and says, “look at this my dear child. Look at what I have done for you. I have been

crucified for you. I have been beaten and slain for you. I was raised again that you would live forever! And now I have washed you of the sin that kills you. I have given you my body and blood as the medicine tending to the wounds that you bear as you live in this sin broken world. A world where sin gouges you and pierces you just like a shattered glass on a tile floor. And yet I wipe away that blood. I stitch up your wounds. I cover your scars with the robes of my peace.

This is what happens here. Christians, can we honestly say that this is boring? That's not boring, we are boring. We are boring sinners just like every other sinner in the world. And there we see just how deep our sin goes. And there we see the need for this proclamation. Jesus came proclaiming this forgiveness of sin. He came proclaiming repentance and forgiveness because that's what we need. We often think that we need more moral instruction, and more direction about being a better person, but the church isn't here to be a health club for the fit. It's a hospital for the dying.

And when we see this we see the great gift of the church. In fact, as we see this we realize the depth of what the church really has to offer. All the more, think about the questions that the world perhaps isn't always asking, but is always forced to at some point: why do I suffer? Why, if there's a God, did he take my loved one from me? Why is it that every time I start to get ahead something bad happens and now I'm behind the eight ball again? Why is it that my "pure hearted" child has been diagnosed with a terminal disease? Sure, the world is asking all of the questions about how to be healthy and fit, how to be wealthy and comfortable, how to be popular and well-liked. But in the end we all know there's something more. And Christians, that is where we are witnesses.

In fact, as we celebrate the Ascension today, this is where we have an answer. Why is there suffering? Because of sin. But our God has not left you in that sin. No, He has come into the world and taken even your sin upon Himself and died for you, rising again that you would live. In fact, this God, Jesus, ascended to heaven so that now He works all things to the good of those who love Him. Not the temporal good, not the guarantee of a six pack (in the bodily sense or in the liquid sense), not the guarantee of a padded wallet, not the guarantee of adoring people all around you, but in the sense of what's far beyond that. The promise of the eternal riches. The promise of the body perfected in the glory of God. The promise of approval not of man, but of the whole God head who created the universe. The world might not be asking the question directly, but Christians, listen and it's there. Bear witness then, when you hear it, knowing that you won't be able to convert them, and that's OK, because Jesus might just determine to use that confession to bring that person to Him. He might do this for them, just as He did this for you in His grace as He brought you to repentance and the forgiveness of sins in His name. Amen.