

John 17:20-26

Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Well, I had one of those weeks. I had one of those weeks where God pulled a switch-a-roo on me on Friday. As most of you know, I typically start looking in earnest at my sermon for Sunday on Sunday afternoon of the previous week. By the time I get to Saturday, most of the work is done and I just have to put it down. At least, that is the way I hope it works. This week was no different and by Friday I was pretty much, ready to finish things up. But. Then came Friday. I hope that it will make sense by the time I get finished here this morning.

I have to share some really troubling news with you all. I know that it might shock you, but a feel that it must be shared.

Alright...here we go...I don't know if you knew this, but...Adolph Hitler, the head of the Nazi Party, Chancellor of the Third Reich, initiator of World War Two, was a baptized Christian! That's right. Adolph Hitler was a baptized Christian and you know, although I'm not sure of this, but I have it on good authority that as a child he might even have been an acolyte. Wow, I am glad to get that off my chest.

Unfortunately, there is more. Did you know that the Crusades, that effort that spanned over two centuries and killed as many other Christians as they did Muslims, was conceived and executed by...wait for it...Christians? While I'm at it, I might as well tell you that The Inquisition, that ecclesiastical court that tried and executed people who were found lacking in faith...yes...that's right...you got it...Christians!

That fourth grade bully from elementary school who went to church and talked about Sunday School, that driver with the bumper sticker that said “My Boss is a Jewish Carpenter” right next to the fish symbol, who made that obscene gesture as he cut you off in traffic, and yes even that tow truck driver from Greenville who just last week made national news because he refused to help someone because he didn’t like their bumper sticker...all church goers.

Man! With facts like those, why do I even wear this uncomfortable collar? Why in the world do I get up early every Sunday morning, week after week after week? Why do I show up to EYC on Sunday nights, especially during football season?

Well, let me tell you what is NOT the reason that I do those things. I don’t do them because I place my faith in human beings. I don’t do those things and so many others, because I follow people, even church going people. I do them because I follow the Love, Truth, and Sacrifice taught and lived by Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose from the dead so that I would have a path and a life that doesn’t rely on the frailty of people and their ever-changing inclinations and limitations.

So, why am I talking about this this morning? Well, I am doing so because I am so thankful that on Friday I was blessed by a person who was struggling with their identity as a Christian, and thinking of leaving the church, because of the inappropriate actions of others who claimed to follow Christ. That person did me favor. That person reminded me of a reality that challenges all of us every day. It is a reality that we need to face, as we go through this life.

And so, here is the message that I think God would have us hear this morning. It is not a continuation of the message that we have heard over the past couple of weeks...the ones that taught us that “They will know us by our love” or how Jesus will infuse us with his peace. Those are good messages, but the message for today is more about the other side of the coin. It is more about the “what if.” What if we don’t show our love or what if we don’t embrace his peace? What if people look at us, or we look at other Christians, and don’t see God? What then? What would God say then?

Well, after he loved us and invited us back into a closer relationship with him so that we could have a full life and we could share that full life with everyone; after that, if we keep going it on our own, I think he would say, “Ok. But **do not** let the world define me by your unwillingness to follow!” And/or, “**Do not** let the world define me, **for you**, because of others who refuse to live out a faithful life!”

You see, here is the thing. Many in the world want to put us on defense. They want to get us doubting. It goes like this: Adolph Hitler was a baptized Christian...Adolph Hitler was

responsible for the death of millions of people...thus it naturally follows that Christianity is nonsense.

Or it goes something like this: The Christian church existed in the 11th century...a portion of that church...a portion of that church that was led by wrong-headed humans, over two hundred years, raised a series of armies and sent them to the Holy Land to kill a bunch of people, Christian and non-Christian alike ...thus you must admit that the truth and teachings of Christ are invalid.

Or an individual in our world today, or our city today, does something ignorant...he claims that it is God who told him to...so, because of that, the teachings of an entire faith should be rejected.

And God says to his church, "Do not let me, or the Christian faith, be defined for you or for the world by the actions of someone who fails to follow Christ." And that is the simple message that I thought we were supposed to hear this morning.

It may seem like this is a message about those out there who act in ways contrary to what our faith teaches. But it is really not. There will always be people who live out their faith imperfectly. I'm one of them.

This may seem like a message about those people and groups that are constantly in search of examples of Christians who make mistakes, but it is really not about them either. That type of thing, and those people, have been around since the church began on the Day of Pentecost, with people wondering out loud if they were all drunk so early in the morning.

What this message this morning is about is our reaction to those things. It is about how we react in a world that seems bent on finding examples of how people fail in living out their faith and then turning that into national news and a referendum on Jesus Christ.

How do *we* react? Do we react, with love, by expressing sorrow for the inappropriate action of an unthinking individual or a misguided group? Or do we buy into the premise of the nay-sayers and apologize for our faith, or even leave the church, because some person, professing Christ, gets it wrong? For example, when the rate of divorce of church members almost exactly mirrors society as a whole, do we blame the church as if somewhere deep in Ecclesiastes Christ teaches that marriage should only last until the next best thing comes along. Or, instead, do we admit that that is not what our faith teaches and that we all, in and out of the church, need to strive to better embrace the life that Christ calls us to? How we react makes all the difference, for us and for the world.

I have to admit that there are times, Friday was one of them, when I just get tired of being told that we should be apologizing for Jesus and his message because human beings fail in their struggle to follow him. I mean, don't you? Aren't you getting tired of being told, in essence, that Jesus and Christianity is unloving when someone who happens to have a cross around their neck fails to love. Aren't you getting tired of the headline in the national news being "Christian Businessman Cheats his Customers" instead of "Wayward Businessman Acts Against the Clear Teaching of Christ and His Church." Shouldn't it trouble us when young people stop coming to church because others, who are unwilling to even investigate the real teachings of Christ, point to the failures, instead of the great successes, of faithful people throughout time and try to define our faith through the mistakes instead of pointing to the powerful message that Christ really taught and inviting people to envision what life might be like if we would embrace that message?

Mind you, I don't mind hearing about how some Christians act inappropriately. We should hear those. It keeps us accountable. I just wish that we would also hear that without the life and teaching of Jesus and the church that came into existence through him, without those, slavery would still exist, the hospital system as we know it would not exist, women would still be so much more oppressed, children would have little value, the poor and the sick would be left to fend for themselves, war would actually be more prevalent and more vicious, not less, and the golden rule would look a lot different than "do unto others as you would have them do unto you"; and that is just to name a few.

So, how about this thought to take with us today? The next time someone tries to define Christ and his church through the public failures of a few, or even a one, instead of giving, apologetically, into an inaccurate portrayal, how about us being willing and ready to proudly proclaim the true and powerful teachings of Jesus.

Just a thought.

Amen