

January 22, 2017

The Message for All – Jesus

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth be mediations to our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

SERMON

The Epistle reading for this morning comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Now first century Corinth was a very interesting city. It really had two different sea ports connected by a canal. It was a place of great diversity. It was a place where people came together from different countries, different cultures, different religions. It was also a city that had a synagogue because during the Babylonian some of the leaders of the Jews had been taken there. They had maintained their identity as Jews by forming into a synagogue. By coming together on the Sabbath regularly, reading the Torah, and saying the prayers. So, that was kind of established. And they had been there long enough that some of the people of Corinth who had come from different religions or had no religion at all began hearing some of the theology, if you will, of the Jewish people. And they were drawn to that. They were drawn to this idea of a creator God. One God that was not linked only to a country, but was a God of all creation. That was a God who had chosen people to draw others to himself so that they could live a life that was intended in creation. And some of the Pagans were drawn to that message. Some of the people who had no religion at all were drawn to that message for their lives. So much so that actually the synagogue that was built in Corinth was funded by some of the non-Jews of that city as they became a part of the community without making a full commitment to the Jewish faith.

Now Paul brings a new message. A message that sounds very much like the Jewish message. Matter of fact, refers to what we know as the Old Testament, to the Torah, to the prophets. As he is preaching a new message. That now the Christ that was spoken of and the prophet Isaiah has come into the world. His name was Jesus. And he gave his life so that all could have salvation. That this was what had been hoped for and prophesied by the Jews. And now is the time. And the message is that he came to offer salvation to all people. And to become a part of this once you have heard and accepted that message. That message of love of God and being baptized. Then you are part of a new community, this kingdom of God. That was over the governments of the nations. That swept across all that was known. And here was an invitation to be a part of that community.

Well the Jews weren't real happy with that because it took some of their benefactors. But a lot of the people, those benefactors of the Jews, and even more of the Pagans as they were known, they were drawn to that message. And they became the church. There was a church that was made up of Jews, of Gentiles, and they were becoming this kingdom of God. And trying to live that out.

Now what we have in the letter, the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians is a response to some questions that they were having as a church. Questions like do we need to be good Jews and follow all the law in order to become good Christians. Some of us were baptized by Apollos, some got their message not only from Paul but from Cephas. And each one is a little bit different as they are trying to understand the message of the gospel. And what it means for day to day living. And what this has caused in this city of great diversity and a church that is diverse are even bigger divisions. Well we

follow what Apollos taught us. He baptized us, we believe what he said. And his message is a little different from Paul's so we're with Apollos. And of course, the people and often the leaders of the church receive the message from Paul, whether he was the one who baptized them or not. Well we're following Paul. We're going to stick with what we know. With the one who brought us the message who had this relationship with the risen Lord. Who had this encounter with the risen Lord. And therefore, we're going to follow him in what he had to say. Well but Cephas he was the one who was the rock. He was the one that Jesus choose to be the rock. The foundation of the church. So, we're going to follow what the followers of Cephas have been telling us. And so, the followers, the church, writes a letter to Paul. What's going on, what do we do, how do we live this out? This is all new to us.

It takes the Jews out of their comfort zone. It's something completely new for many of the Pagans. So, what do we do with this diversity. And it's clear that in addressing this in what we have made the first chapter of his letter. He didn't write it in chapters, he just wrote a letter. He uses the beginning of his letter to address the divisions. And if he was more modern day he would say something like, "What the heck is wrong with you people? What are you doing? You're divided about who baptized you or who you got the message from or what message you are going to follow because there are slight differences?" The message is secondary, what's important is that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ. That he came into the world to share with all of us. A message of salvation, a message of the kingdom of God. And that's the message that unifies us. That's the person who unifies us because he not only taught, he not only healed, he gave his life. Gave his life, so that you could have salvation, so that I could have salvation.

See Paul didn't have any encounter with Jesus while he was alive, when he was doing his teaching. He knew about him. He knew enough that he thought that he was wrong. That he was leading good Jews astray and he fought against the church until he had that encounter with the risen Lord on the roads of Damascus. And his mind and his heart were opened to what Jesus has done. He has changed, he knows, he understands what it is to have your life completely disrupted. To have a good idea of how life should be lived in relationship with God and then find out that God has done something new. And it changes how we see things, it changes how we live our life, it changes who we are because we are now God's children. We are now part of God's kingdom. And now we are called to proclaim that message because it's not a message for a few, it's a message for all.

And it all comes under the name of Jesus. And he wants the people to know that and he spends so much of his letter trying to get them to understand what they have become and what they are becoming. You are the church, you're the body of Christ. Yes, you're different. Even the Holy Spirit has given you different gifts and you're trying to understand how they can work together. Or what's most important. You keep thinking in terms of the world and the Holy Spirit is an encounter with the kingdom of God. Where no gift is unimportant. And no gift is more important than another. You are called simply to offer who you are, offer who you have become, offer who you are becoming. And the gifts that you've been given so that we can proclaim the gospel in a way that brings people. That gets them to know and understand the great love of God that was manifest in Jesus Christ.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to the end that all who believe in him shall not perish but have ever lasting life. That's who we are, that's the church. You can see it as a body, you can see it as a community. But see it unified. Sure, there are different parts. But they're all important.

The diversity and the conflict that Paul saw and addressed. You know 2000 years later we have kind of the same problem going on in the church. Well I'm a Methodist and we see things this way. Well I'm a Baptist and we see things this way. Well I'm a Catholic and we have it from the very beginning and we were the church so we know that it needs to be this way. Well the Orthodox, they say no it needs to be slightly different from that and it needs to be like this. And the Episcopalians say here we are. (Laughter). It is so much like saying I'm for Paul, I'm with Paul. I didn't mean to leave the Lutherans out by the way, they are just as guilty. We just have the truth. And I rest my case. So later on, when he says I follow Lutheran.

We all have to be under the name of Jesus. That's the central message. That Jesus came into the world as the Son of God to offer salvation to all people. And we have allowed our different ways of living that out to overshadow that we are all part of the church. And that could be a good thing, it could be a strong thing. It could reach more people and speak their language. Where they could live it out and be comfortable with who they are and who they are becoming because they are part of the Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians. But we have to get beyond this idea that the differences should divide us. We have to get with the program that as our presiding bishop Michael Curry puts it, we are all part of the Jesus movement. That's the name that's important. Not Lutheran, not Presbyterian, not Roman Catholic, certainly not Episcopalian all that means is bishop. Just describes how we try to do our polity for heaven's sakes.

We are called to say Jesus is the Christ. He came into the world. God and humanity came together and came to give us a message. The message is that God loves every human being. All that God has made. He declared it good in creation and in the giving of his son he said I'm not letting go. I'm not letting go, I want every one of you to know life and to know joy and to know peace and to know love. So, straighten up. Allow one another to do it their way. It's not a matter of right and wrong. As long as we are under the name of Jesus Christ. As long as we are a part of the kingdom of God. As long as we are a part of the church. Then we are fulfilling the mission. We are proclaiming the good news and people have the opportunity to hear it, receive it. Make it a part of who they are. So, that God's their life in a way that they can truly abide by.

There's division everywhere. Goodness knows in the last year we've seen more division in our country, more division in the world than any of us wants to see. Let it not be so in the church. We are a part of the Jesus movement. It began with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It went through his free years of walking the Earth as an adult, preaching, teaching, healing, proclaiming that the kingdom of God has come near. Proclaiming that the kingdom of God is here, now. And you're invited, you're invited to be a part of that kingdom. Not matter what earthly kingdom you are a part of. You are invited to be a part of God's kingdom. A kingdom that unifies us. A kingdom that shares the love of God with one another. A kingdom that gives us hope where there is none. Gives us light when there is darkness. Gives us life when there is death. Gives us wholeness where there is brokenness. That's our message. The other little trivial things of how we do it, how we do our worship, and how we proclaim it. Those are all secondary. Those are all means of contacting more people and speaking in a language that they can hear and receive and accept. And we proclaim our message, not condemning others, but holding up the name of Jesus Christ. By inviting others to become a part of this vast kingdom of God. Where they can know hope, where they can know love, and where they can know eternal life.