

Love Is An Action Verb
Matthew 22:34-36
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, October 26, 2008

It's no secret the Church in America has lost both the authority and respect it once had as a growing number of people are simply turned off. Have you seen the bumper sticker, "I love Jesus but don't like Christians"? Maybe you've heard a family member or friend say, "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious."

Many people believe in God, but reject organized religion. Why? Some of their perceptions are unfairly formed by antagonistic media types who consistently take potshots at religion in general and Christians in particular. However, the Church's wounds are also self-inflicted as churches fumble opportunities to welcome and love the stranger in need.

In the past month I've met with two young couples looking to get married. Both couples belong to congregations out of state but have recently relocated to Baltimore. Unfortunately both couples were turned down repeatedly by local churches because they weren't members. One pastor even said, "My church isn't the Las Vegas Wedding Chapel." When I heard this I remembered what John Dillinger said about Bonnie and Clyde, "They give bank robbers a bad name."

I can understand, to a point, why some pastors have a "members only" wedding policy; they don't want their churches to be used as the stage for a "pretty" church wedding when the couple doesn't take God seriously. I agree it's tempting to direct them to the County Court House. But I'm left to wonder would Jesus turn these couples away? Or would Jesus seize the opportunity for meaningful conversations that just might bring them into the Kingdom of God.

Years ago, when just starting out in ministry, I read an article about a Catholic priest who ran a street ministry to the homeless. The reporter asked him, "Father, when did you decide to become a priest?" I'll never forget his answer: "I decided to become a priest five years after my ordination."

What makes a priest, or for that matter a Christian, is not just believing in the right doctrines or practicing the right rituals, instead it's all about taking God and your neighbor seriously by living the servant lifestyle and realizing our foundational doctrines are really all about accessing and then applying God's love in real life situations.

The parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew's Gospel makes it clear we won't be taking a final exam testing whether we've mastered correct Christian theology, instead each will be asked, "Did you live for others, the 'least of these,' or only for yourself?"

As in recent weeks, today's gospel lesson continues to take place in the Jerusalem temple during Holy Week and once more we witness Jesus being bombarded by still another cynical question designed to bring him down.

One of the Pharisees, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Like a broken clock that tells the right time twice a day, the Pharisee asked the right question.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:34-)

Something tells me the Pharisee didn’t like Jesus’ answer. Normally Pharisees enjoyed complicated, hair-splitting, “inside the box” answers that were safe and predictable. They were sure of themselves living within the strict confines of their rituals and traditions but actually stepping outside their comfort zone to take risks and make sacrifices was just as unnerving for them as it is today for us. Be honest, isn’t it safer gathering with each other within these four walls than stepping out to love and serve anyone God sends straight at you. Isn’t it safer doing something “religious” than doing something significant that could save and transform a life?

When Jesus ascended back into heaven leaving his Church behind, it was with the understanding we are now the guardians and keepers of God’s Kingdom. If you’re Christian, it’s your job to make the Kingdom of God come near and become real. How? By being a disciple who takes the Great Commandment seriously enough that every day you live what you believe.

One of the oddest events in history took place in 1917 the same day the Communist Revolution broke out in Russia. A synod of bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church was called to debate not the issues surrounding the gathering crisis facing Russia, or the problems of poverty or hunger...no, the bishops convened to debate the new liturgical colors for their vestments. This may sound too far fetched to believe until you hear about nearby churches having knock down, drag out fights over the color of the new carpet in the sanctuary or whether or not to buy new hymnals instead of harnessing that same energy and passion to love God, our neighbors and ourselves.

Jesus’ new teaching really wasn’t new. But here’s the genius of it. He combined two separate verses from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 that neatly summarized the total message of the Bible. Only by loving God first and foremost can you be empowered to truly and completely love your neighbor and yourself. You can’t love one without the others.

Keep in mind Jesus’ brand of love isn’t emotional and mercurial. Instead God’s love, agape love, is based on decision. You make the commitment to love not just people you like, but even the people who don’t deserve your love. Maybe you don’t like someone because of a lifestyle choice or the person is proven to be untrustworthy and dishonorable, but you can remember Jesus loving the unlovable and then become empowered to go and do likewise even though it’s inconvenient and disagreeable.

Of course remembering Jesus is key. You can’t completely love someone unless you let Jesus love you first. So remember Jesus, leaving the security of his perfectly balanced, loving relationships with his Father and the Spirit, and coming down to live with the flotsam and jetsam of humanity, in order to make love possible. Remember Jesus, inviting us to enter into the love triangle we call the Trinity. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit perfectly, the Son loves the Father and the Spirit perfectly, the Spirit loves the Father and Son perfectly, and Jesus invites us to enter into and experience forever this perfect love.

I started this sermon grieving the Church’s myopic vision of ministry to non members and strangers. This happens when we become so caught up in religious practice

and gate keeping we forget why we are the Church in the first place. The Church is not an exclusive club for members only. The Church is the Body of Christ, called to be friend to the friendless, heal the wounded, feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

Being Irish, I have a special affinity for St. Patrick who clearly put flesh on the gospel every day of his life. Listen to this ancient Irish prayer attributed to this great missionary to the lost.

I arise today
Through a mighty strength,
the invocation of the Trinity,
Through the belief in the threeness
Through the confession of the oneness
Of the Creator of Creation

I arise today
Through the strength of Christ's birth with
his baptism,
Through the strength of his crucifixion with
his burial,
Through the strength of his resurrection with
his ascension,
Through the strength of his descent for the
Judgment Day...

Christ be with me, Christ within me
Christ behind me, Christ before me
Christ beneath me, Christ above me
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger
Christ in hearts of all that love me
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

I bind unto myself
The strong name of the Trinity...
The Three in One and One in Three
By whom all nature hath creation
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word"
Praise to the God of my salvation
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.