

“CHURCH IS SOMETHING YOU ARE, NOT WHERE YOU GO: Jesus is the Mission!!”

Ash Wednesday

Peace Lutheran
Grass Valley, CA

February 18, 2015

Joel 2: 12 – 19
Colossians 1: 9 - 14
Matthew 6: 1 - 6, 16 – 21, 24

TEACHING POINTS FROM THE MESSAGE:

1. Blueberry mix and cherry pie.
2. What about the “packaging” for Christians.
3. Outward mark or inward identity?
4. Growing faith helps us “deliver” on what we “advertise”.
5. Hearts growing deeper into Jesus so that Jesus shines through. Hearts deep in Jesus so that our lives as church live up to the labels we carry.

Linda Duncan of Dewar, OK (Mountain Wings Original #6324) tells of having opened a package of blueberry muffin mix to prepare for her grandson’s breakfast. She found only ONE blueberry in the whole package, which, she says, gives a whole new meaning to “Blueberry Muffin Mix” — you see it didn’t say “Blueberries Muffin Mix”. She says that the muffins were pretty bland and tasteless. Somehow, the machine that filled the package didn’t make much contact with this particular package.

One of the fun stories in our family is a visit to a Minnesota restaurant especially known for its wonderful pies. The particular reason for the trip was so that Gramps could get a very good piece of freshly baked cherry pie. Turned out that the piece of pie he got had only 3 cherries in it. He sent it back. The second piece had only 2 cherries in it. He ate it. He wanted to quit while he was ahead. He thought it was the worst excuse for cherry pie that he’d ever seen. Seems as though the cherries made only passing contact with this particular pie.

It occurs to me that the same could be said about Christians. Sometimes they live in a package that says “Christian”, but inside there is very little evidence of a living relationship with Jesus Christ. Outside, there is a “Christian” label. The life that is labeled, however, is bland and useless for the Kingdom of God. It appears that Christ has made only passing contact with these particular people.

This is the issue Jesus is getting at in the section of the Sermon on the Mount read from Matthew tonight. Jesus is pointing out that the “label”, the outward that evokes praise from peers, is not nearly as important as what is inside. In fact, Jesus seems to say, what is inside carries so much weight that it doesn’t matter much if how public the deeds are because God takes pleasure in the good work of the believer. Jesus seems to be teaching that religion needs to make more than a passing contact with those who claim to be religious.

As examples, Jesus lifts up the mainstays of public faith practice: alms and offerings, prayer and fasting. In so doing Jesus moves important faith practices from something of a show to a means of growing closer to God and of experiencing God’s blessing, joy and presence. We notice that Jesus uses the word “hypocrite” to describe those who seek to impress neighbors (the outward label) rather than to experience God on the inside. In fact, the word hypocrite has the sense, in the original language, of “actor” or of taking on a role. In that sense the outward actions are done for show without any inner conviction behind the deed.

Here in lies the essence of the idea behind this Lenten focus: “Church is something you are, not where you go!” Here in lies the essence of our identity. “I go to church” is something of a label, that outward mark that makes a statement about us. Like the blueberry muffin mix, “I go to Peace Lutheran Church” makes a claim that at some point is only skin deep. “I go to church” has something to do with what is on the outside. It may not have much depth.

“I am church” is much more. “I am church” about who we are. “We are church” is an all the way through identity. “I am church” is the essence of our inner being, our inner commitment. Being Church is the fruit of the essence of being deeply connected, rooted in Jesus, and filled with Jesus. “We are church” is at the heart of who we are as God’s people.

For us to say that church is something we are is to focus on Jesus. To say “I am church” is to focus on a purpose, a mission, and a ministry. To say I am church is to reflect something from the inside of our being—it is not just a label about something we do. The mission focus of being church, then, is Jesus. The mission focus of being church is not us, it is all about Jesus. At Peace Lutheran it is about Jesus in the sense being a shining light of the Good News of Jesus, the Christ.

Then, in order to grow spiritually, in order to make the number of cherries (or blueberries or deep faith) in our lives match what we advertise on the outside, we need to grow into Christ. We need to grow deeper into Christ.

Looking closely at Paul's letter to the Colossians, we see Paul addressing this same idea from another side. We see Paul's prayer that people are being "filled".

What are they being filled with? They are being filled with "the knowledge of God's will through spiritual wisdom and understanding".

What does this mean? I think it means that what is being put on the inside is to match what is on the outside. If it is blueberry muffin mix, it has to have blueberries. If it is cherry pie, it has to have cherries. If it is Church, as whom we are, then it must be filled with God's gifts, God's presence. God's grace. I notice that Paul isn't talking about just a little filling. Paul is talking about being really full. Filled to overflowing. The filling isn't just academic or intellectual knowledge. It is the personal knowledge of Jesus. It is Jesus taking up the right place in the heart of life. It is Jesus power and presence dwelling deep in the life of faith.

You see, ultimately it's all about the heart attitude. Our lives in Christ are not for the glory of the task. Our lives in Christ are to just be "good enough". Our life in Christ isn't to show off. Our lives are because we want a more intimate life in Jesus—our treasure. It is because Church is who we are. It is because the Mission is Jesus.

Linda's muffins were pretty disappointing. Gramps' pie was pretty tasteless. Deceptively packaged Christians can also be a big disappointment to those who expect us to be so much more—such big disappointment that they won't want what we have.

Of course, one of the dangers of our marks of ashes is this: we've been marked with the cross of Christ on the outside, but have we been filled on the inside.

Deceptive packaging? It's largely up to us. Up to us to focus on hearts rooted in Christ. Hearts growing deeper into Jesus so that Jesus shines through. Hearts deep in Jesus so that our lives as church live up to the labels we carry.

Church is not where we go. Church is something we are. May we live up to God's high calling in Jesus. Amen.