

unchristian

A sermon preached on Confirmation Sunday (May 2, 2010) at Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina by Dr. Ken Carter.

The gospel for this morning is placed within two critical moments in the life of Jesus: his betrayal by Judas, and his sense that Peter will deny him in his hour of greatest need. The context is important: betrayal and abandonment from those within the inner circle, friends who had listened to his teachings and witnessing his healings. In this moment, John tells us, Jesus is glorified.

What does this mean? That precisely in these circumstances love matters most, for this very reason the word is made flesh, the light shines in the darkness. Love is not a sentimental feeling or a throwaway term; it is an act of the will, and reflects the very heart of a God who demonstrates his love for us, the apostle Paul writes, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The context is further situated amidst crucial symbolic acts: Jesus washes the disciples' feet and he shares the Passover meal with them. And so we have a sign of community, an example of servant leadership, a reminder of tradition. And then a teachable moment: **I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**

What is new about all of this? There was, in the Jewish tradition, the Shema, the core teaching, "*you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.*" Observant Jews (including Jesus) said these words every day. So love was not invented when the New Testament was written; there was a two thousand year history of a people who loved God and their neighbor. What then is new commandment? It is not that they have never heard these words before. It is that, in the person of Jesus, they are experiencing them for the first time.

Jesus is about to leave them, and so there is this sense of urgency, as if a truth, a way of life is being passed along. We have this experience on Confirmation Sunday, and at this time of year we also go to high school graduations, college graduations, it is a season of transition, wisdom is passed from generation to generation.

This year Teresa Dunn has led a gifted group of members of our church in creating an experience of learning for twenty two of our youth. Earlier in the spring Bill, Tara and I met individually with each of them. It is a gift to spend a part of your day, or your week, with a young person. I would ask questions like, "*What do you want to do when you grow up?*", "*What was the most important thing you learned about God?*", "*Do you ever pray, and what is that like?*"

It is intriguing to wonder: what is going on inside those minds, those hearts, where will they end up in life? I think back over 27 years of ministry, the small rural church that had two in the confirmation class, a boy and a girl, when they took their membership vows, one of the moms said, she looked at them side by side and it seemed like they were about to get married. I think of some of the young people who have passed through those confirmation classes: one I saw last night, at Merlefest, playing in a band with the comedian Steve Martin; that was not his original ambition, he was a college soccer player, but, as the commercial says, "most of us go pro in something other than sports". He seems to have figured out what he wants to do with his life. I could ask you, the adults here this morning, what do you want to do, who do you want to be, when you grow up? As the poet Mary Oliver puts it,

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Or, as Bill George, of the Harvard Business School faculty, poses the question, have you "discovered your true north"? There is the possibility, within these growing boys and girls, that they will hear the voice, maybe not an audible voice, but God's call, and they will figure that out. And there is that possibility, wherever we are along the trail, that we will see the burning bush or hear the calling voice and be interrupted. It happened for Abraham and Moses well past the middle of life, it happened for Paul even as he was entrenched in what he had been taught and believed. It could happen to you and me.

"What do you want to do when you grow up?" "What is the most important thing you learned about God?" This is where the conversation gets more interesting. Sometimes the young person will glance at me, look around my office and it's like an outfielder who has lost the ball in the sun, it's floating somewhere in the sky. But sometimes the responses are amazing, as if they have been waiting for someone to ask that question.

What do young people believe? Over the past few months I have been working my way, off and on, through an excellent book entitled *UnChristian*. *unChristian* is an exploration of what a new generation (ages 16-29) thinks about Christianity. It comes from the evangelical stream of North American Christianity, and George Barna, a very well-known pollster contributes the forward. It is a sober reporting of data drawn from a group that the church seems to be having difficulty retaining. There is, the authors report, "a growing tide of hostility and resentment toward Christianity", an attitude that comes less from the media and more from personal experience.

Christians are known more for what we are against than for what we are for. And the three most commonly held perceptions held by outsiders, age 16-29, about Christianity, are that 1) we are anti-homosexual 2) we are judgmental and 3) we

are hypocritical. Interestingly, attitudes toward Christianity are not all that different among those inside the church!

Do these perceptions matter? The authors are clear that these perceptions are the result of relationships by outsiders to the faith with Christians. This should move us to self-examination, to a "wake up call". The simple thesis of unChristian is that we have placed obstacles in front of people that are keeping them from seeing what the faith is really all about. And that leads us back to the gospel. Our task, our missionary task, is to reintroduce pre-Christians to what they are missing, ex-Christians to what they have cast aside, almost Christians to what they might experience if they moved a little closer to Jesus and came to know him.

If we are going to be Christians in the future we are all going to be missionaries. Many people have bumped into a church along the way, but at times they have been bruised; and many people have had their fair share of crisis along the way---loss of job, or end of a marriage, or addiction---and this has led them to withdraw from community. So a Christian is a missionary. In a former generation, cultural conformity would keep all of this going, but even as the Barna research suggests, things have changed radically over the last few years. In 1996, 86% of those outside the church had a favorable impression of it. In 2008, that number had gone down to 50%.

This is relevant to me, today, because this is the world these young people are going to grow up in. They will live for most of the 21st century, many of them, and some of them will live into the 22nd century. That is amazing. And if they are going to be Christians in the next next 50-75 years, they are going to be missionaries, they are going to be very unusual people. I love the phrase of Flannery O'Connor, "*You will know the truth and the truth will make you odd.*"

It is not going to be our grandparent's church or world, and we are not talking about matters of style---what kind of curriculum we use, what style of worship we seek out—we are talking about the core substance. **What does Christianity have going for it, and why would someone be a Christian?**

It turns out we have one thing going for us, and that is the new commandment embedded in the old, old story of Jesus and his love. Jesus not only talks about love, he embodies that love, he washes their feet, he shares a meal with them. He loves them. He loves them even when they are not deserving of his love, and, of course, that is precisely the point, that is grace. The most important thing the world could learn about God, when all of the stereotypes and negative impressions are peeled away, is that in Jesus Christ God has come to love them. **I give you a new commandment, love one another, just as I have loved you.** And then Jesus added the hard part of the teaching: **the people will know you have been**

my students if you love each other. He was talking to the very community that had known its fair share of hypocrisy and judgmentalism, betrayal and denial. They were a work in progress.

We're all a work in progress. When I am sitting down with a confirmand, I will say, "you understand this as a twelve year old, as a thirteen year old and you will understand it in a different way when you are twenty or forty or sixty or eighty. Don't get me wrong: if you are twelve or thirteen, and you are in middle school, life can be tough. Some of the most brutal people in the world are middle school students. I am stretching the truth only to a slight degree! Some of the adults here this morning are probably still carrying around baggage from the sixth, seventh, eighth grade: "I was not in the right group", "I was always the last one to get chosen", "I'm not smart enough", "Someone is talking about me".

So we are always students, disciples of Jesus, confirmation is not graduation from the church. And the spiritual crisis many adults face is that they are connecting adult, real world experiences with an understanding of God that never developed beyond 12 or 13 years old. The understanding is not that we come to the perfect mental idea, as if we have figured out the equation. It is more like an act of the will, and that is the heart of prayer: *thy kingdom come, thy will be done*. We're not here to be perfect, and we aren't going to find any perfect Christians. It is about progress, not perfection. We don't love people because they deserve it; very few people do. We love because people need it, they've been battered by life and maybe bruised by the church and what do they do: many of them end up blaming God. Actually that is kind of like an equation: battered, bruised, blame.

The gospel is not a formula, an equation; actually the gospel is an interruption of all of that. Jesus talks to these young, fragile students, disciples, and he says, when you grow up, what means the most to me, and what will matter most to you, even in the most difficult of circumstances, is that you love one another.

The gospel is always a wake-up call, penetrating to the core of who we are---- heart, soul, might---and our response is not so much to master information as to experience transformation, and that is an act of will, which finally is what it means to say Jesus is Lord. As we go about our one wild and precious life in ways that uncover the gifts that our uniquely ours, we glorify God. As we focus not on what we are against, and but on what we are for, we glorify God. As we love one another, we glorify God. And by these actions, everyone will know that we are students, disciples, followers of Jesus.

Sources: *unchristian* by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons. "The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver.