

HEAVEN, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

A sermon preached by Dr. J. Matthew Burton

Central United Methodist Church

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(**Luke 23:33-49 NRSV**). {33} When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. {34} Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. {35} And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" {36} The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, {37} and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" {38} There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." {39} One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" {40} But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? {41} And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." {42} Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." {43} He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." {44} It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, {45} while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. {46} Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. {47} When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent." {48} And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. {49} But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

(**Acts 2:37-41 NRSV**) Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" {38} Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. {39} For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." {40} And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." {41} So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

"Houston, we have a problem." Most of you are familiar with this statement or have heard it before. It was first uttered on April 14, 1970, by Commander James A. Lovell while floating in space aboard a small metal capsule known as *Apollo* 13. Hundreds of miles above the earth's surface something had gone terribly wrong. As the result of an onboard

explosion, there was not enough oxygen or propulsion to get the crew home safely. It seemed like a tragic and impossible situation. The whole episode was well documented in dramatic fashion by Ron Howard in the movie *Apollo 13*. The crew and the NASA experts were faced with their greatest challenge. This episode could either become a great tragedy or become NASA's finest hour. The statement echoing in space began the process of looking for a creative solution to a complex challenge.

Let me suggest that the church could use a similar phrase. ***“Heaven, we have a problem.”*** Some would prefer not to hear these words any more than Houston wanted to hear Lovell utter his historic phrase. I also understand the complexity of the issues which was also true for Apollo 13. Brian McLaren is right when he says, ***“The Christian faith in all its forms is in trouble.”*** I also believe he is correct when he says, ***“The Christian faith in all its forms is pregnant with new possibilities.”***¹

If we are NOT willing to face our problems and gain insight into the issues, we will never be able to correct our path. There are those who prefer to ignore the subject and some others may think it is an overreaction. It is my personal love of Jesus and I hope yours too that causes me to want to deal with some of the difficult issues facing the church I love.

Let me also preface what I'm going to say with these words, Central is a healthy congregation. We've made many important paradigm shifts in the last few years that have opened the doors and windows of this faith community to the people around us. Yet, we must continue to ask difficult questions. I'm proud of the fact that we have ten young people who will come into the membership of this church through confession of faith during the sanctuary worship. At the same time, I know it should be 30, 40 or 50 especially in a church this size. Also, while we bring in 50-70 new members a year most of those are through transfer of

¹Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: Ten Questions That are Transforming the Faith* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), xi.

membership rather than through profession of faith. All we are doing is recycling members from one church to another. We are not making new Christians.

I have worked with too many congregations that have

- Lost their sense of mission to those who have not heard about Jesus Christ and do not pant after the Great Commission—“***Go and make disciples of all nations.***”
- Who exist primarily to provide fellowship for the “members of the club.”
- Who expect their pastors to focus primarily on ministering to the member’s personal needs rather than training and equipping gifted individuals in the congregation to be ministers. Christ modeled this for us when he trained the 12 disciples.
- Who have not idea about the needs of the “stranger outside the gates.”
- Who are more focused on the past than the future.
- Who watch the bottom line of the financial statement fore than the number of confessions of faith.²

The issue as I see it is that there is a vast number of people who think churchgoers are only interested in converting them rather than getting to know them—understanding their questions and concerns. There is also a sense in which people think we only want them to make our numbers look good or contribute to the budget of the church. Unfortunately, sometimes without realizing it, our evangelism efforts actually offend people. At times, the church has been offensive, harsh and even spiteful in its attempts to “save” people rather than get to know them, meet them where they are and walk with them as a representative of Christ. Respect for people is very important. II Timothy reminds us, (I’m using Eugene

²Bill Easum, *A Second Resurrection: Leading your Congregation to New Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 5.

Peterson's translation) ***“God’s servants must not be argumentative, but a gentle listener and a teacher who keeps cool, working firmly but patiently with those who refuse to obey. You never know when God might sober them up with a change of heart and a turning to the truth...”***³ The church needs to remember that people commit to Christ because God changes their heart. It’s not something we do. It’s something God does!

NO QUICK ANSWERS

So what do we do about this barrier that has developed between the church and the rest of the world? First, we need to understand, there are no easy answers. The wall didn't get built over night and we cannot take sledgehammers and chisels to it. We cannot bring it down in a few weeks like the Berlin Wall. We may not be able to solve the problem quickly but I believe recognizing that a problem exists is one positive move in the right direction. I hope we can wrestle with this issue together.

YOU CAN'T PIN JESUS DOWN

Many of you are familiar with C.S. Lewis. He was an atheist who taught at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. He was eventually brought to a relationship with Christ by his friend and fellow writer J.R.R. Tolkien. Soon afterwards, Lewis wrote a series of books called ***The Chronicles of Narnia***. In these fairy tales, Lewis tried to explain what it would look like if God entered the world. In his story, Jesus is a lion by the name of Aslan who comes to the mythical land of Narnia.

In the Second book of the series, ***The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe***, four children from England magically enter Narnia through the doors of a wardrobe. They first hear about Aslan from Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. They are frightened to hear that he is a lion and they ask Mr. and

³II Timothy 2:24-25.

Mrs. Beaver if he is tame. The character Susan says, ***“I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”***

“That you will, dearie, and make no mistake, says Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” says Lucy.

“Safe?” says Mr. Beaver. ***“Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver is telling you?...Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King.”***

So many churches, preachers and others have tried to pin Jesus down. We’ve tried to make Him safe and predictable. We’ve developed pat phrases and God language that we expect everyone to speak. They are like code words that mean you are in. Even calling or not calling someone “brother” or “sister” can mean you are in or out. Jesus is more than our human frameworks. I think people outside the church are beginning to see this. They are put off by our formulas and phrases like ***“Once saved, always saved”*** and ***“eternal damnation”***

We have tried to make Jesus, the Lion of Judah, predictable, and logical. Lions aren’t tame. You cannot pin Jesus down. He’s not predictable. The bottom line is the world doesn’t need another institution that goes out and tells people what to do. What Jesus is building and putting together, I believe, is a culture of reckless love. Even on the cross, Jesus showed compassion for the thief on the cross next to his. The church has struggled over the centuries to do this so I believe God has unleashed the Holy Spirit in culture and as Reggie McNeal says,

We are in a God-intoxicated culture! The Spirit has gone nuts. He’s jumped out of the church and is running wild in the streets. God has sent the wave and the church is playing catch-up to the Spirit.⁴

⁴Reggie McNeal, *Quote from the Catalyst Conference* (Atlanta, GA: October 9, 2007)

It's the same situation in Acts when the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost. God's people, the Hebrews, failed to see what God was trying to do so God sent Jesus. We killed the messenger so God raised Him from the dead and set the Holy Spirit free. This led to an expansion of the church and God's message through the Apostle Paul and on it went. God I believe is doing a similar thing. Will the church be left behind? Will we continue to try to pin Jesus down and make him our mascot instead of our master? As Reggie McNeal says,

*Will we toss up the sail to catch the breeze that's already blowing? Will we realize we can't command the breeze to blow where we want it to go?*⁵

YOU CAN'T CHOOSE YOUR CUSTOMER

One important thing the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us is that the post-modern—the future church—will no longer be a homogeneous unit. One standard worship experience and one standard way of doing things will no longer work. We have kept our traditions and lost our children. We have lost our call to reach the nations. We are more about me getting personally fed than making a difference in the community and world. God is calling us to a new day.⁶

As the children in C.S. Lewis's make believe world of Narnia realized, the center of God's will is not a safe place. It is one of the most dangerous places in the world. God has no fear. He fears no one. God moves with intentionality and power. ***“To live outside of God's will puts us in danger; to live in his will makes us dangerous.”***⁷ We can no longer choose our customer because we are being challenged by God in all sincerity to reach out to our neighbor and friends who may think and

⁵ibid.

⁶Erwin Raphael McManus, *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God had in Mind* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2001), 31-33.

⁷McManus, 32-33.

look differently than those of us within the walls of our fortress, the church.

Before the hair on the back of head (if you have any) begins to raise up at what I'm saying, let me remind you that the church began as a Jesus movement in Jerusalem. Some people wanted it to stay that way but it quickly spread like wildfire from Jerusalem to Judea and out to Samaria. Eventually it spread to the ends of the earth—so much for a small comfortable, safe movement! You can't pin Jesus down nor can you choose your customer when it comes to the work of the Holy Spirit.

THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH

So how can we be the church that God is calling us to be? What is the Holy Spirit trying to communicate? Again, let me say, there are no quick answers. We are in trouble because, as Brian McLaren reminded me,

We have dethroned Jesus to such a degree that the “Jesus” who is preached, pasted on bumper stickers, serenaded in gooey love songs on religious radio and TV and prayed to is an imposter.⁸

We have promoted a Jesus who saves us from hell but care little about the Jesus who wants to save us from greed, gossip, prejudice, violence, isolation, carelessness about the poor or the planet, hurry, hatred, envy, anger, pride, or self-centeredness. We have developed theological systems and ways of thinking that shield us from many of Jesus' teachings and help us reinterpret those we can't avoid. We have demoted Jesus and God to best friend. *“Me and God are like two peas in a pod,”* as the country and western song reminds us.

So what do we do? Again, I turn to someone smarter than me for help. Brian McLaren says this:

⁸Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 85-86.
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If we were to try to reinstate Jesus as Lord/Teacher, we would have to go outside the world of popular modern theology to find ways to think about the meaning of Lord/Teacher. We would go to the world of arts and trades and notice how a master violinist, a master carpenter, a master electrician, a master of martial arts passes on her mastery to students or apprentices. The only way to learn this mastery is through the disciple's voluntary submission to the discipline and tradition of the master.⁹

AUTHENTICITY

What this leads to is an authentic Christian. I'm using authenticity as an opposite to insincere. When we are authentic, people know it. They see it, sense it, hear it and know it—at least most of the time. Authenticity comes from knowing the master. What the world needs from those of us who profess to be followers of Jesus is not more sermons, fancy slogans, billboards or television spots with quick witted and sharp evangelists with White teeth and perfect hair. What the world need is not another praise song or fancy church program. What the world needs is for us to take them somewhere they cannot go alone.

RELATIONSHIPS

The people who are calling us insincere, hypocritical, and a lot of other things need a person who has been in the presence of God and will take their hand and lead them there. They need someone who is willing to step into the sometimes, brokenness, tragedy, loneliness, and struggle of their life and show them the beauty in the brokenness and tragedy called life. Being Christ-like isn't comfortable. It's dangerous as Mr. and Mrs. Beaver reminded the children caught in the land of Narnia. It's dangerous but it is also beautiful.

The mentors to the young people who will join the church this morning are a wonderful model. To come alongside someone and be there through thick and thin is what we are called to do. To let the love of

⁹McLaren, 86-87.

Christ shine through in everything you do is more important than you will ever know.

In closing let me return to Apollo 13. As the disaster began to unravel, a team of desperate men came together at NASA to face a difficult problem. Using simple components already on board the space capsule, they found a creative solution that brought the astronauts home. What was quickly becoming one of the greatest tragedies in NASA's history instead became its most heroic moment.

What would have happened if the people involved refused to recognize that a problem existed? As people of God, we must recognize that we have a problem and devote all of our creative energy to a solution. This recognition along with a clear objective and creative energy can accomplish much. God has given us all that we need. There are solutions right in front of us. God is with us. God will guide us if we are open to the Holy Spirit's movement. Ask, and you shall receive. Let's ask? Let's ask for the sake of our children