

Loving Like Jesus

Today's readings all point to what we should do as a believer in Jesus Christ. The reading from Acts 17 where Paul is in Athens and sees a place dedicated 'to an unknown god' tells us that even if we 'sense' that there is something that we might be missing in our beliefs, then it is God the Creator who can fill all those missing blanks. We do not have to invent another god or be like the Greeks and 'cover our bases' to make sure that all the 'gods' are included in our worship. In his first letter, Peter is urging the early Christians to act how they say they believe. That their words and actions are consistent with one another and point to the glory of God and Jesus. In last week's reading from first Peter, he tells us that we are part of a priesthood of all believers, that we are a special people, a special community united by our belief in Jesus and called by God to show God's glory in the world. In the Gospel reading, Jesus is continuing His instruction to the disciples about how to act when He is no longer with them, giving them (and us) the assurance that we will not be left on our own to figure it all out.

So that can lead us to the question, "What sets us apart, as Christians, from the rest of the world?" Is it simply having a belief that Jesus is the promised Messiah and delivers us into the kingdom of God? Is it following a prescribed set of doctrine & beliefs? Is it belonging to the 'right' denomination? Could it be going to church every Sunday? What about following a certain set of behaviors, a collection of do's and don'ts, such as not smoking or drinking or dancing or playing cards or having tattoos? These kinds of questions arise when we consider the first verse of today's Gospel reading where Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Someone listed 1050 commands found in the New Testament. Are we to use this as a check-off list, marking each one off as we obey them, hoping to

reach that 'magic' number we need to reach to make it to heaven? Or is being a Christian more than this, more than following new commands, is it something else?

If we think that being a Christian is simply believing in the saving grace of Jesus, given to us on the cross and through which our salvation is guaranteed, allowing us to 'take it easy' and with no requirements of us, then we rely on what has been described as 'cheap grace,' thinking that nothing more is required of us than our belief. If that is the case, then why would Jesus tell us to keep His commandments? Taking this approach of needing to simply believe, we wind up gambling with our salvation. Yes, Jesus died for our sins and we see where simply believing is enough. However, there are enough other places in the Scriptures where Jesus talks of judgment based on our actions. Do we want to gamble with our life in this way?

That still leaves us with the question of how do we keep Jesus' commandments and how do we love others the way Jesus loved us? In other words, how do people know that we are Christian?

Consider these three stories to see if any of them represent what being a Christian means:

When the USFL football league was still in existence, there was a game that was tied after regulation time. The captains of the two teams met at midfield for the coin toss to see who would get the ball first in the sudden-death overtime. The official tossing the coin had a mike around his neck. The visitors called tails as the official flipped the coin in the air. The coin landed heads up. Unfortunately, the official forgot what the visitors called, so he said, "What did you call?" Seeing the coin with its heads up, one of the visitor captains said, "We called heads." The home team tried to convince the

official that the visitors actually called tails, to no avail. One of the home-team captains turned to the visitors as they were running off the field and said to them, "But I thought you were Christians." You see, the evening before, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes held a banquet and many players from the visiting team attended and some had given a witness to Christ.

Or consider this story: Once there was a farmer who raised sheep. Their neighbors didn't, but they had kids and large dogs. Dogs would always come over, scare sheep and sometimes kill the lambs. The sheep farmer didn't know what to do. He could have shot dogs, poisoned them, taken neighbor to court or be nasty/threatening to neighbor to control his dogs. Prayed about what to do, then came up with a solution. He gave a lamb to each of the children for a pet. They were thrilled. Shortly afterwards the neighbor then tied up the dogs and the two farmers became friends.

Or this story: There was a Chinese Christian farmer whose plot of land was on a hillside. He had to carry water up the hill to water his crops. There was a small barrier to keep water from running downhill and off of his plot. The farmer below him would keep putting a hole in barrier so that his crop would get watered by the Christian farmer. Finally, the Christian farmer would just carry up enough water for both fields. The other farmer noticed asked and why. Christian farmer explained he was acting out of love as JC commanded that he carried more water up the hill. The other farmer was so impressed with this that he eventually became a Christian, as well.

How do our actions measure up? Are our actions more like the football player, the sheep farmer or the Chinese farmer? Do we help others out of love & compassion, or do we see what we can 'get' from others for our own benefit?

The Gospel readings from the last few weeks are from Jesus' final discourse to his disciples on Maundy Thursday. These are like His last instructions, telling them how He wants them to act. This is similar to Moses' last instructions to the Israelites before he died or even Joshua's instructions before the Israelites separated to go to their own lands after returning to Promised Land. But unlike Moses and Joshua, Jesus gives us the assurance that because of the intimate relationship He has with the Father, we will not be left alone, that we have the help we will need when faced with adversity, that we don't have to figure it out ourselves, but that we are given the help and the guidance we need to do God's will. There is definitely Good News in that!

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/2wc7KRXBGuA>

Service: https://youtu.be/tCQSAaII_NA