

"CROSS CENTERED CHRISTIANS"

Intern Pastor Dave Christianson

On Luke 13:31-35

Sunday, February 28, 2010

I bring you greetings from our brothers and sisters in Christ, worshipping at Upper Pigeon Creek Lutheran Church this morning. I have discovered many of you have friends and relatives in the Osseo and Northfield area. For the rest of you who are curious, this is the parish I also serve half-time as a synodically assigned minister since 2008 while attending Wartburg Seminary.

This being my first sermon here, I'll share a little introduction with you. My home town is Bloomer, where I was raised on a dairy farm, went to a one-room country schoolhouse, and was baptized and confirmed at Our Savior's Lutheran. I have a brother and two sisters, and many relatives scattered around this area. I graduated from UW-Eau Claire with a business degree, after spending time at Grambling College in Louisiana and independent study in Chicago with several railroads. I moved to Houston, Texas, in 1973 with Shell Oil, and spent seven years there before moving to Los Angeles with Conoco. During this time in Texas, I was unchurched and living a relatively undisciplined but intense lifestyle.

I spent many of my earlier years in oil trading and transportation, working with refineries, oil tankers, pipelines, and trucks. In the midst of chasing personal business ambitions, the Lord saw fit to let me be caught by my first wife, Penny, who brought me back to the church and instilled some peace in my life. (This is a great example of how behind every clueless man stands a good woman!) We had a son, Michael, and counted up eighteen blessed years together in California before her death from breast cancer in 1997. Michael and I returned here in 1998, drawn back by family matters. I met my second wife, Connie, in 1999, and became steadily more active in Lutheran Church of Peace near our home in Woodbury while working at public service jobs in Minnesota. Participation in ministry there led to church council, Sunday School teaching, choir, confirmation mentoring, homeless shelters, and Habitat for Humanity work. By 2007, the call to ministry became too loud to ignore. I had been unwilling to listen to it since my teen age years, but the Lord is patient.

My status currently is that of a TEEM candidate, a little different than a seminary intern. The E.L.C.A.'s TEEM program, a path to ordained ministry designed for second-career calls, gave me

the means to answer the call. It ties life experience, active assignments in lay ministry to provide income and experience, and an extension program for seminary classes to provide an alternative to a conventional seminary education. The demands of a four-year academic masters program can be simply too daunting and prohibitive to a person like me who is called late in life. I turn sixty this year, and several of our classmates are seventy. Having to learn on-line, and being expected to produce masters-level essays on theology proves that it's never too late to change and learn. Everything is possible in the Lord! TEEM intentionally and thankfully trades the requirements of a formal campus-based education for active learning and service, and an extended commitment to our home congregation after ordination.

How I came to this point had an immense amount to do with the Lord's presence in my previous life. Work in the transportation industry in California included running warehouses and trucking terminals sandwiched between the ethnic neighborhoods of Watts and East L.A., and later twelve years managing operations on the waterfront in the Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach. In the middle of dangerous and even deadly conditions, labor disputes, gangs and crime, and round-the-clock work schedules, I still witnessed the cross among us. At the least expected moments, and in the least likely persons, faith, compassion, grace, and self-sacrifice appeared in surprising ways and moments. In an environment where often a worker was killed by accidents or violence almost every month, watching out for each other and sharing grief and comfort was an earmark of many longshoremen, despite personal risk and temptations we all have to look the other way. When my wife died, the grace and compassion shown by total strangers among these hardened veterans was truly awesome. God and the Spirit often opened my eyes and ears, and those of others, to something greater than our human instincts would normally produce. The least among us can shame us, instruct us, and lead us to the light and the truth, especially in the most trying of times in our personal lives.

The cross can be experienced in a lot of ways in the Christian church. It reminds me of the story my wife tells of our eldest sons. Nick, the oldest, entered a Catholic church with Connie after dropping off David, the youngest, in the nursery. Nick was transfixed by the great crucifix in the sanctuary, and had to know why the man was hanging up there. After a whispered explanation of Christ's death for us, nailed to this tree, he sat silent for the rest of the service, staring at the cross. When the service ended, they collected the younger brother, but Nick pulled David back into church, and pointing up, said, "Look!". David asked, "What's that?". Nick solemnly turned to him and announced, "That's where Jesus got nailed!".

In the Gospel passage for today (extending the metaphor), the carpenter's son who has become great Rabbi, healer, and prophet, is being framed on the way to being nailed. The

Pharisees warn him that Herod is out to kill him. Jesus responds to the warning with a biting reply. He labels Herod a fox, clever and predatory. The word used by Luke in the Greek can suggest "wild dog" or "jackal" as well, suggesting Jesus' feelings toward these leaders. In contrast to the stealthy and deceitful work of Herod and the priests to kill the person they see as a political rival and revolutionary, Jesus notes that he will not run but continue to cast out demons and heal the sick; God's work as opposed to their earthly scheming. In his own time, following God's will, he will leave Galilee and continue his journey to Jerusalem, and not by any suggestion or threat by the people trying to influence him. He has no misconceptions that these opponents of his were intending to kill him with no compunction or regret.

He clearly states that on the third day he will be on his way, to Jerusalem and the cross. In repeating this twice, he alludes to a second schedule- "On the third day, I finish my work"-dying on the cross as the divine sacrifice for our sins, and being resurrected on the third day. He will be falsely convicted, tortured, humiliated, dishonored, and killed in Jerusalem, the Holy City. Satan's opportune moment that was predicted after the temptations in the wilderness climaxes in a single day of betrayal and death, driven by the humiliation, fear, selfishness, and hatred of the nation's political and religious leaders.

But Christ Jesus accepts this as his divine path, the only way that he is able to fulfill God's promise of healing and reconciliation. His is an un-anxious presence in the face of this Devil's brew of evil trying to bring him down. He prophesies his own death in Jerusalem, the Holy City that is the slayer of prophets and stoner of innocents. It is at this unexpected and surprising moment that Jesus reaches out in love to the very people of Jerusalem who threaten his life and his mission. In the face of their unwillingness to accept Christ as Messiah, he laments their desolate future, and wishes he could have gathered them to him as a mother hen gathers her chicks to her.

A friend of mine in Eleva tells about how one of his hens faced off a not a fox, but a raccoon five times her size after he clawed his way into their henhouse. The mother hen, with sheer ferocity and bluff, chased him away, saving her entire brood without hesitation despite the threat to her life. Out of sheer passion and motherly love, she defeats the deadly intruder and protects every one of her children.

Like Jesus' example in the gospel, the love of the mother hen trumps the evil of the fox.

Jesus ends with a prophesy that leaves hope for these unwilling ones. They will see him only

when they declare this: "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." This is a bald-faced statement of Gospel. It is accepting God's love shown in the Messiah's coming, realizing our salvation by the grace of God alone, through faith that comes by the gift of the Holy Spirit in us. It is looking on the cross and seeing in Jesus' selfless sacrifice the fulfillment of God's promise of perfect faithfulness to us, and the gift of new life in the resurrection.

Before Jesus, the cross was the ultimate and unique symbol of the horror imposed by the world's greatest empire and culture, the Roman Empire, to enforce its presence by force, torture, and death. The Empire reserved this punishment for its worst criminals, including all who would question the worldly power of Rome and deny allegiance to it. Jesus Christ took this cross, and in God's grace and forgiveness turned it into a message of hope that we all have yearned for.

We center our lives on the message of the cross. Looking on this greatest of all human sins, Jesus' crucifixion, that in one word from Christ is forgiven, we are at once broken, with remorse, humbled, and opened to rebirth. Remember his quotation, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." As Jesus walks on his way to Jerusalem, he points us to see him and that cross in the light of God's love and promise. This is our hope and our faith, in Christ who willingly accepts death for our sake, and reaches out to enfold us under his wings of love. The blessed Son comes to us in the name of the Lord, calling to us to live in God's grace, even as that love and grace leads our Christ unerringly toward Jerusalem, the cross, and the fulfillment of God's will.

Thanks and glory be to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.