

## **How Christianity has changed**

Acts 5:27-32, Revelation 1:4-8

April 3, 2016

“How Christianity has changed”

First, I must tell you, the sermon title is not mine. None of the sermon titles for the four Sundays in April come from me. Two weeks ago, I asked the members of our confirmation class and their high school mentors -- Katy and Japhy and Maria and Zoe and Leah and Laura and Lauren and Katherine -- I asked them to suggest topics they would like addressed in a sermon. From their lists, I chose four.

The first is this, “How Christianity has changed,” quoted verbatim from one of the lists. I don’t know whose because I told them not to write their names. “How Christianity has changed” -- I am supposed to answer that in one sermon? It is a huge topic, a broad topic, a subject for many sermons, but let’s make a start.

How has Christianity changed?

It has been splintered, splintered into a myriad different Christianities, into tens of thousands of distinct denominations. Now diversity is not in itself a bad thing. You will remember Pope Francis’ remarks about the “beauty of her varied face,” and a monolithic church, a church where all followers of Jesus think alike and act alike would surely be much less interesting and much less powerful and so much less authentic, a creation not of Jesus, but of us.

But this? A church divided against itself, churches quarreling amongst themselves, the Jesus proclaimed by one hardly recognizable in another? We must grieve, sorely grieve, the heart of Jesus who prayed that we would all be one, who said we would be known to belong to him because of our love for each other.

We are not one, but many. Just in this country, just in this state, just in this town, Christians can be on opposite sides -- opposite sides! -- of so many vital issues, political and social. What do Christians believe? What do Christians stand for? What do Christians care about? I guess it depends on whom you ask.

But how can this be? How can the followers of Jesus be so divided? Does it mean that it’s not real, that Jesus is not real, that we have all made him up to be whatever we want him to be?

Or does it mean that we have not all listened well enough, that we have not all listened closely enough, to the real Jesus? That’s it, isn’t it? Not all of us are paying close enough attention to Jesus. I will leave it at that.

Christianity has struggled with oneness from the beginning. That has not changed. Early on, there were tensions between Jewish believers and Gentile believers, between rich and poor, between emotive, ecstatic worshippers and those more reserved. Even among the leaders there were significant differences about who should be welcomed into the church and how.

But they did manage to stay together and to work together and they did love each other, because they remembered what mattered most, because they remembered who mattered most, and because they listened to the Holy Spirit. That is what has changed. We have stopped listening.

How has Christianity changed?

It has become establishment. At the beginning, after Jesus' death, Christians were outsiders, dissidents, a minority group, a persecuted minority group, eyed with suspicion and repressed alike by the Jewish establishment and the Roman empire, and that oppression continued for decades, for centuries.

Persecuted Christians, like Peter and his fellow apostles, responded with unwavering faithfulness: "We must obey God, not men." They continued to provide a bold witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus and to the power of those events to change people's lives.

It was hard to be a Christian then, but good. But now, it's easy. It's not hard at all to be a Christian. You can be a Christian simply by default. But when you are a Christian just because everybody around you is a Christian and it is just the thing to do, there is no passion, no transforming witness, no boldness, no power, no purpose. Being a Christian means very little, if anything.

When Christianity became the established religion, the religion of the establishment, when it was co-opted by empire, it was transformed into something innocuous at best and insidious at worst. It became another tool for controlling people, instead of setting people free, another tool for subduing the masses, instead of redeeming the masses, another tool for reinforcing the prerogatives of the elite, instead of turning the world upside down. So these are the questions you should ask yourself, right here, right now: Whom do you serve? To whom do you answer? Whom do you obey? God or men?

How has Christianity changed?

Its moral standards, the outward marks of holiness, the "do's and don't's" seem always to be changing. When I was young, you knew you were a Christian because you didn't drink alcohol, smoke tobacco, gamble, play cards, or go to dances or movies. When I was young, women weren't acceptable candidates for ministry. When I was young, openly homosexual men and women weren't acceptable candidates for ministry.

All that has changed, at least in some churches. But has Christianity changed or have we changed?

In the church's early days, alcohol wasn't an issue. In the church's early days, there were women in ministry. And, at the beginning, at the very beginning, Jesus said "Do not judge others, so that God will not judge you." Maybe we are not losing our Christian values, but rediscovering them.

And that, to me, is the point. From generation to generation, from age to age, the marks of holiness may change, but holiness itself does not. To be holy means to belong to God, first and foremost, and to know that you belong to God, first and foremost. The core of what it means to be a Christian has not changed. Christianity, at its heart, in its essence, has not changed.

*May none of God's wonderful works keep silence,  
night or morning.*

*Bright stars,  
high mountains,  
the depths of the seas,  
sources of rushing rivers;  
may all these break into song  
as we sing to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

*Power, praise, honor, eternal glory to God,  
the only giver of grace.*

*Amen! Amen! Amen!*

This has not changed! These words were written 1500 years ago or more, but we could say the same words today. We did say the same words today! Power and praise and honor and glory belong to God, because of who God is, because our God is a God full of grace.

From the beginning, Christianity was all about the grace of God and it still is. From the beginning, well before the advent of Christianity, it was all about the grace of God and it still is ...

... the grace that calls the worlds, all that is, into being and finds delight in it,

... the grace that creates human beings to live in it and to find delight in it and to take care of it,

... the grace that loves us and shows us the way to life, that calls us to love God back and to love each other, to live in shalom and to make shalom,

... the grace that finds joy in completing our joy.

The message, the gospel, has not changed. It is a message not about afterlife, but about life, a message about love, about relationship, about beauty, about justice, about mercy. It was good news and it is good news! And, in a world full of bad news, it is news worth telling -- boldly!

God is. Power and praise and honor and glory belong to the Lord God Almighty who is, who was, and who is to come. In the face of the brevity and constant upheaval of our lives, this is the constant: God is.

I am, but I was not and I am not to come, at least until the day when by God's grace and power I am raised to life with Jesus. That puts things into perspective. We are part, one small part of a very long story. We are a speck, one very small speck in a vast universe. But, by God's grace, we matter. What we are matters. What we do matters. We have been given the tremendous privilege and the awesome responsibility, of being human, of being like God.

And we will succeed. We will make it. We will win over death and destruction, over hatred and over evil, by God's grace, by taking Jesus' way, by the power of the Holy Spirit in us, because God is with us, because God is. That has not changed and that will never change.

So this is my final word on how Christianity has changed. It hasn't.

The sermon title seems to couch a worry that Christianity may change too much, that it may become unrecognizable, that it may become outdated, outmoded, irrelevant, that we may grow beyond it, that it may go the way of all human institutions and die. But it won't, because it is not a human institution, but a way, a life, a way of life, gifted to us by God, and just when all seems lost -- when Jesus himself lies in a grave -- God's grace triumphs!

"To Jesus Christ be the glory and power, forever and ever!" Christianity is not our way, but Jesus' way, and he lives still. He is present still among his people. He is still speaking to us, if we will listen, if we will just listen ...

May we listen to Jesus! May we remember what makes us one, not what divides us. May we live our faith boldly, passionately, purposefully, because we have chosen it, because we have chosen to follow Jesus. And may we remember what matters, not confusing what matters less with what matters most.

The fact is there will be many conflicts we may struggle to resolve, many mysteries we may never understand, many questions for which we may not have answers, but it's OK. It's OK not to know all the answers, as long as we know the answer, the one who is the answer. In the midst of change and mystery, and in the face of fearful uncertainty about the future of this world and of ourselves, we choose to put our faith in him, we choose to believe in him, we choose to believe ...