

Motive

John 20:19-31, 1 John 1:1-4

April 15, 2012

Same-sex marriage. Immigration reform. “The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.” Capital punishment. Enhanced interrogation. The war in Afghanistan. This is a short list of some of the issues, political and social issues, about which we in the church are in complete agreement!

Right? Aren't we? We're all Christians, we're all followers of Jesus, right? And Jesus shows us the way, right? Shouldn't we expect to see things the same way? Shouldn't we expect to be of one mind, even about issues like these that prove so divisive to everybody else? All we have to do is listen, listen to what Jesus says, and we will know what to do, right?

Why isn't it that easy? Why isn't it that clear? For several reasons ...

First, because “what we see now is like a dim image in a mirror.” The light of Jesus is shining, but we still move among the shadows, and it remains true that people love the darkness rather than the light, sometime even people like us. The light of Jesus is shining, but our eyes are still adjusting to the light, and we don't always see things clearly.

We can trust Jesus, but we can't always trust our perception of Jesus, which is why we need to approach any decision, any issue, with a great deal of humility, with a readiness to listen to other followers of Jesus, and with a readiness to change our minds as more light does get through.

Second, though we all follow one Christ, we are not all the same, and that is a good thing! We have different histories, different perspectives, different gifts, different ways of thinking and feeling, and the church needs all of us!

No one of us has a monopoly on the truth. No ones of us can lay claim to an exclusive and complete knowledge of the mind of Christ. The Spirit of Christ is not so much in us, one by one by one, as the Spirit of Christ is among us -- among us when we gather for worship, among us when we gather to pray, among us when we gather to serve, among us when we gather to seek together to understand God's will.

So we need each other. We need the Christ who is made present to each of us in each other. We need to be patient and humble. We need to listen and watch and grow and do ... together.

But a third and most telling reason that, even in the church, we can be so divided on issues of critical importance is that our opinions are shaped more by our politics than by our faith. We come into the presence of the Lord with our minds already made up, looking to Jesus, not for illumination and guidance, but for justification of what we already believe.

We are so good at compartmentalizing our lives. Here, in the sanctuary, we call on the name of Jesus, but out there, in the real world, we rely on other teachers, other mentors, other sources of truth and wisdom and savvy to tell us what to do and how to think and how to live. But if our faith in Jesus has nothing to do with how we live in the real world, nothing to tell us about the issues that profoundly affect people's lives here and now, then what -- on earth -- is it good for?

We follow Jesus so we will know how to live, how to be, here and now. So we need to listen to Jesus. We need to let our minds be transformed by listening to Jesus, because what Jesus says is clear. What Jesus says is clear and we will know what to do, we will know how to live, if we listen carefully.

So what does Jesus have to say about immigration reform, health care reform, capital punishment? Not much, directly. Jesus doesn't always tell us what to do, but Jesus does tell us why to do it! Jesus provides the motive.

It's all about the motive ...

Is it possible to do the right thing for the wrong reason? But, then, is it really right?

Is it possible to do the wrong thing for the right reason? But, then, is it really wrong?

Is it possible to do nothing at all, for no good reason?

Do you see how much motive matters? How much having a good reason, having the right motive, matters? And Jesus is very clear about motive. Jesus is very clear about things that come out of the heart. That's our focus today: motive, three simple motives found in three simple phrases from the readings in the gospel and letter of John.

The first simple phrase: "That you may have life." This is John's motive.

These have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have life.

It's about you. It's all about you. Not to convince you or win you over or add you to our growing list of members, but so you may have life.

It's about you! It's about what you need, about what will benefit you, about what will bless you. It's about your life. It's about you having life. It's about you having life instead of death. John is writing to bring to those who will hear a gift, the gift of life, the gift of life through Jesus.

There's a lot of conversation these days about the culture wars and about the role of people of faith in the culture wars, but if our motive as Christians is to offer to all who will hear a message that brings life, how can we be involved in a war at all? War is all about winning and losing, about taking your life to preserve mine, but Jesus gave his own life to offer life to everyone in this world.

Our job isn't to fight to defend our way of life, to fight a war so that our beliefs and our values and our way will prevail over their beliefs and their values and their way. If we did fight such a war and win, what would we have gained? What would they have gained? Our job is not to win a war, but to offer ourselves, to offer Jesus, so that "they" may have life.

The second simple phrase: "That our joy may be complete." That's how the first paragraph of John's first letter ends.

What we have seen and heard we announce to you also, so that you will join with us in the fellowship we have with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We write this in order that our joy may be complete.

So that our joy may be complete. Isn't that a rather selfish motive? Wouldn't you expect the writer to say: "In order that your joy may be complete?" Apparently some of those who copied the letter thought so because they changed "our joy" to "your joy!"

But think about it. If our joy is not complete until you are able to share it, isn't that a most unselfish motive? We tell you of what we have seen and what we have heard so you too will join us in the fellowship we have with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We tell you what we know of God so you will know God too and no longer remain alienated and estranged from God, but be brought back into intimate relationship with the One who made you and loves you. We tell you what we know of Jesus, so you too will know the word of life, so the One who is life will live in communion with you, strengthening you, guiding you, breathing life and hope into you.

Do you see? It's not about protecting my space, my hopes, my destiny, my happy relationship with God from any outside threat -- including you! It's about going outside to find you, to bring to you the word of life, to tell you about the One who gives life, because if we did not, our joy would not be not complete. Without you our joy is not complete.

The third simple phrase, the third simple motive, comes from Jesus himself: "As the Father sent me, so I send you." "As" can refer to the act of sending itself: "As the Father sent me, so now I am sending you, too." But "as" can refer, too, to the manner of sending: "As the Father sent me into the world to you, in the same way I am now sending you into the world."

But if we are sent in the same way Jesus was sent, how was Jesus sent? Jesus was sent ... by being sent! Jesus came to us. Jesus didn't hide himself in some secret location and say, "Come find me!" Jesus didn't stand on top of some high mountain and say, "Come climb up to me!" Jesus came to us, where we are, how we are.

Cliff Highnam was telling me this week about "floor time," a promising program for treating children with autism. It's a form of play therapy. Cliff will train trainers who will in turn train parents to play with their children.

The key to the therapy is letting the child take the lead, not asking the child to come to where we are, to adapt, to conform, to adjust his behaviors to match the expectations and norms of the world which can feel so alien to him.

Rather, his parents will come to him, be with him, inhabit his space, in order to make contact, in order to build relationship, in order to build real relationship.

That's the critical need for autistic children -- to be able to develop a capacity for forming relationships, and "floor time" therapy has shown success in helping to bridge the emotional and social divide between autistic children and "others."

I told Cliff this approach is rather biblical! And it is. Jesus comes to us -- emptying himself, setting aside his world and his will and his wants and his rights to meet us where we are, to build a relationship with us, to give us life.

Jesus comes to us -- welcoming, healing, loving, forgiving. He comes to us to invite us, to invite us to follow, to invite us to follow him into a new way, into a new life, but only after he has first come to us and shared our way, shared our life. Jesus comes to us -- so we may have life, so by giving us life his joy may be complete, so by giving us life God's joy may be complete!

And Jesus says, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." This is how we are sent. Our way is his way. Our motive is to be like him. Our one true motive is to be like him.

So where have we come? Are we any clearer about same-sex marriage or immigration reform or health care reform, about capital punishment or enhanced interrogation or the war in Afghanistan? Do we know now what we should think and do and be as followers of Jesus? If we're not yet sure what we should think and do and be, we should at least be sure how we should think and do and be as followers of Jesus!

We know that we think about issues and choose positions not to benefit ourselves, but so that they may have life.

We know that we do what we do, not just to pursue our own happiness, but so that our joy may be complete, so that our joy may be made complete by sharing it with them.

And we know that we live to be like Jesus, to be like Jesus by offering ourselves, by giving up our own rights and wants and pleasures, by leaving behind our own safe and comfortable places, our own safe and comfortable ways, to go to where they are, to be with them, to bring them life.

And we know that before all else and above all else we belong to Christ, and that belonging to Christ, we belong to each other. We remind ourselves of that fact every time we take communion! And because we belong to Christ, before all else and above all else, nothing should tear us apart. Nothing can tear us apart! No issue can divide us.

We can be patient with each other until the light of God grants us more clarity. We can be humble and listen to each other and welcome each other because we know Christ is present among us. We may not be able yet to walk out of this sanctuary today of one mind about all the pressing issues of the day, but we can walk out of this sanctuary today with one heart, the heart of Christ that binds us together and sends us into the world as the Father sent him.