

Saving Life
Ezekiel 34:17-24, Luke 6:1-11
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
February 4, 2007
Pastor Dave Carver

I have in my files a yellowed newspaper clipping from about seven years ago. It's an obituary – one of the larger, longer, “News” obituaries. It caught my eye because right after the person's name, right next to his photo, the first two words used to describe the deceased were “Church elder”. I thought, “Wow! Of all the things that they could have said about this person, the first descriptor was that he was an elder. Let me read what his faith was like...”

So what did the article say? After describing his boyhood and education, it mentioned that this man, whom I'll call “Smith”, was a deacon, a Sunday school teacher, and a ruling elder of one of our larger Presbyterian churches. One of his colleagues had this to say: he was “a very good churchman” who reminded the ushers to start marching on the left foot so that everyone stayed in step. “It was a very formal service. So, to be an usher there, you had to know the right moves. [Smith] would instill that in people,” his friend said. There are 23 paragraphs in the obituary. That's all that it says about faith or Christianity. Ushers who knew the right moves.

I dug that paper out of my files this week on the day that another news article crossed my desk. This one deals with a congregation in Texas that has made a significant change. “After a three-year period of much study, prayer, and fasting, the leadership of the...church has decided...” Decided what? I wondered. A statement from the elders of the church indicates that the change will help them to be a more “externally focused church.” OK, I thought. A church that is deep in study, prayer, and fasting. Ready to meet the needs of its neighbors. What's the change? After three years (156 weeks) of intensive study, this congregation will add a Saturday night worship service that includes, for the first time in the church's history, musical instruments.

Beloved, in my view, the news is not good. I do not say this to mock or belittle my brothers and sisters in Christ, but this is discouraging to me. An elder whose seemingly overwhelming faith experience was teaching ushers to march in step. A church that invests three years of prayer and fasting to the end that the “optional” or “extra” service would have a piano or a guitar up front. This is not encouraging to a man who believes that the church is called to great and magnificent things.

What is important about your experience of this place and these people? What makes a church a church? Is it the music? Pews? Short sermons? People who complain about long sermons? What is it that really counts?

Further, what makes a Christian a Christian? If you say you are a “Christian” does that mean you are always in church? Never in bars? Always giving money away? Always praying and fasting about monumental issues and events?

What is a “Christian”, anyway? Originally, the word “Christian” was intended to be an insult. It was a term of derision used by some pagans. It meant, literally, “little Christ”. Some time after Jesus died, people in a town called Antioch saw his followers and scornfully called them “Christians” because they thought that the early disciples didn’t have any more sense than Jesus did. The early church accepted that name gladly. “Sure,” they said. “On our best days, that’s what we are. We want to be ‘little Christs’ in the world today. Maybe you will look at us and see Christ. We’ll take it.”

I want you to think about that dead elder, the piano-less church, and the people who were called “little Christs” as we look at the scripture readings for today. In the reading from Luke, Jesus comes face to face with people – good, kind, faithful, religious, God-fearing people – who are sure that he is doing it all wrong. They look at what he is doing, and they are simply outraged. He’s not following the rules! He’s treating the traditions and the laws scandalously. The ushers are marching all rag-tag, and there’s not only a piano, but drums and guitars, too. What’s going on here, for crying out loud?

Now these religious leaders – our text calls them the scribes and the Pharisees – they were not bad guys. And they weren’t the first to get their priorities mixed up. Hundreds of years before, the prophet Ezekiel was thinking about folks like these when talked about the fat sheep who crowded down into the stream first, and not only drank from it, but got it so stirred up that the sheep who were following had to choose between drinking filth and going without. They fat sheep who were in such a rush to get to the best grass that they trampled all over the rest of the grass and so the other sheep went hungry. And God, through Ezekiel, promised then that there was going to be a Shepherd who would come and who would straighten things out. The fat, fast sheep are not going to get away with it forever, warns Ezekiel. History is full of stories of those who have come to power and in the process, have forgotten what is truly important.

And some of these folks – the so-called “leaders of the people” – are here confronting Jesus because they are offended by the way that he treats some of the rules that they have received and developed. In particular, they accuse Jesus of not honoring the Sabbath because here in the first story, he allows his disciples to “harvest” on the Sabbath by picking the grains and eating them as they walk along. And in the second story, he himself “works” on the Sabbath when he heals a man whose hand is withered. “Look, Jesus, you just can’t do that!” they scream. “We’ve got our policies. You’ve got to keep the rules!”

I’d like to make two observations about these verses, and then connect them with what we’ve heard in previous weeks about the overwhelming grace of God.

In verse 7 Jesus makes the rather audacious claim that “the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath. The religious leaders were concerned that Jesus was “soft” on the laws. They thought that he was treating the commandments of God, and the traditions surrounding them, disrespectfully. And in this interchange with these leaders, Jesus says clearly that HE is superior to the Sabbath. That HE is able to determine when, where, how, and if the laws concerning the Sabbath

apply. He is not saying that the Law is unimportant – he is saying that he is more powerful than the Law. The implications for us are pretty clear, then, says Fred Craddock: “The church is not, then, bound by the Sabbath, but it is not free to treat it cavalierly; rather, it is bound to the Christ who interprets the Sabbath for the church.”¹

There are plenty of Christians, and plenty of congregations, who are more in love with the rules than they are with the Ruler. They are more comfortable living in a black and white world wherein life is a checklist – do this, don’t do that; believe this, deny that; and the tragedy is that they lose sight of the Lord of the Sabbath. They lose sight of the One who loves them. They are so busy trying to earn points with God based on their correct belief or their protection of the Law that they don’t recognize Jesus when he walks in the door. We are “little Christs.” We are bound to him, first and foremost, and we must allow him to speak truth into our lives in every situation.

The second observation I would make comes from verse 9, where Jesus gives the religious people an interesting choice: “Is it better to do good on the Sabbath, or to do harm? To save life or to destroy it?” Jesus says that when you know that someone is dying and you don’t do anything about it, you are contributing to that death. Each of us is *doing* something – we are saving life or destroying life.

Scripture goes on to say that “They were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.” They were angry. No kidding. He questioned their integrity. He questioned their motives. He called them out: “Are you making life better for others, or not? Are you saving, or wasting life?” I’m here to tell you that the world hasn’t changed all that much. Pick your favorite issue – liberal or conservative – and you can see how it’s a lot easier to *talk* about acting than it is to actually save life. Big news Friday about the scientific community releasing a statement saying that, in their opinion, global warming is a fact and that human activity is contributing to the destruction of life on this planet. A lot of folks are pretty hot about that – no pun intended. But not hot enough to grow their own food, change their driving habits, lower their own thermostat, or push for alternative fuels. Nope. It’s easier to just go to the protests. Lots of energy from the folks who are concerned about abortion. But how much of that energy is directed only at electing or hiring someone else to make more rules about fixing the problem, and how much of it is geared towards reaching out to women in desperate situations, mentoring fourteen year olds who don’t know a healthy adult, or living sexually responsible lives ourselves?

I don’t really want to talk about the environment or abortion – I only bring those up because those are easy examples for me of places where people get more concerned about keeping the rules than they do about saving lives.

In my last two sermons, I’ve said that we’re going to listen in as Jesus engages in celebrations with people. We’ve gone with him to the wedding in Cana and we were at the big party at Levi’s house two weeks ago. Today, Jesus and the disciples are not really at a banquet – it’s more like a “drive-through”, all

¹ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation Commentary on Luke* (John Knox: 1990) p. 82

right, a “walk-through” meal that serves as a reminder that those who follow Christ are called to be agents of grace and healing.

I have a lot of people come into my study, or meet me at Sue’s Cozy Corner, or sit with me someplace and say, “You know, Pastor Dave, I’m not a very good Christian.” “Not a very good Christian?” I say. “Tell me what that means.” And oftentimes, we end up in a conversation that involves spending time in prayer and Bible study or getting mixed up in pornography or drinking (usually, folks feel as though there’s not enough of one and too much of the other to qualify themselves as “good Christians”).

Look – those are good, important questions that reveal a lot about who you are and where you hope to be. I hope that if you are asking questions about those things that you will get it right in your life, because that will make your life as a Christian a lot better.

But today, I’d like to ask you if you are a “good” Christian...in a little different framework. Are you a “little Christ”? When people are invited to spend time with you, do they see that as an opportunity to somehow be in the presence of God? Do you radiate joy? Is your manner of walking with Christ attractive to others? Or do they see you as someone who is frustrated about ushers who can’t seem to march in step, and as someone who gets angry about the kinds of singing that we do in worship?

Here’s the deal: when people look at me, I hope that they see me as a Christian. It would be nice if they think of me as a “good” Christian. But I hope that they don’t think that because I’m so good at keeping the rules. I hope that they don’t look at me as someone who is living in fear or obsessed with making a mistake. It is my hope and prayer that when people see me – and you – that they will see life. That they will see the grace and invitation of Jesus pouring forth. And that in that encounter with me, or with you, not so much that they will “like” one of us better, but that they may be caught up in the gaze of the Jesus who has loved them their entire lives. Oh, that God’s grace would shine through my broken and messed-up life. Oh, that the world around me would not see me as a guy who’s pretty good at keeping the rules, but that they might see in me the Jesus who is intent on saving lives. This grace – this amazing grace – is the means by which the world is going to be changed. Can we make it so? Amen.