

McCabe United Methodist Church

May 20, 2012

“When Christians Get it Right”

When Christians Get it Wrong (Part 6)

Pastor Ray Baker

Today’s scripture lessons are familiar to many people. First is the story of ‘Salt and Light’ is a wonderful expression of what it means to live a life based in a faithful relationship to God. Salt is a seasoning that adds flavor to our food. We all know that many foods taste better with a little salt added. Of course, Nurse Jane would like me to give a medical disclaimer that we shouldn’t use too much salt.

Salt adds flavor. We can use this for a metaphor for living a faithful life. As we go out and interact with people we can recognize the importance of using our faith to flavor the lives of those around us. In many small ways we can live in a manner that shows our faith is a part of us.

We can also live our lives as a light to the world. In that same story Jesus used the image of a light which we would never hide under a basket, but instead we place it on a lamp stand so everyone can see it. We can live our lives in a way that lets everyone around us see our faith.

These are very important concepts for us to consider. Why? Because as we’ve been discussing throughout this sermon series there are a lot of young people, a record number of young people who are walking away from the church. People ages 16-29 have walked away from the Christian Church for a number of good reasons. They see us as being judgmental, hypocritical, too political, and insensitive. It makes me uncomfortable to hear these comments, but I also know (when I’m honest with myself) there are times when I am all those things.

What the young people are saying is that if we can’t live up to the standards of the “Loving God” which we profess...than they don’t want to be part of our churches. At the very least we need to be honest about our faults and not present ourselves as

though we are perfect...as though we have it all together...as though we do not commit sins.

The second scripture we read this morning is known as “The Great Commission.” In this passage Jesus is telling all his disciples, both then and now, that we are to go out into the world to share the “Good News.” We are not supposed to keep it to ourselves, but we are to ‘go out’ and share it with everyone we meet. We are called to share the “Good News” with people who are like us and people who are not like us. I know it can be hard to do, but we are not supposed to keep the “Good News” to ourselves.

We don’t have anyone age 16-29 in our choir. What about in the rest of the sanctuary? On a percentage basis...how many people age 16-29 are in our pews...not very many? We need to learn how to share the gospel with people ages 16-29. What we’ve learned from the Barna Research group is we need to do it by being open, inviting, and welcoming of all people.

Our sermon series has taught us a number of important things: it’s important for us to be tolerant and accepting; to be in dialogue with people who are like us and who aren’t like us; we even need to be open to having conversations with people from other religions.

When I preached the sermon title: “When Speaking of Other Religions” is suggested that we be open when we are talking about Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists. Some people questioned how we can be open and yet remain true to our Christian Faith. I think it’s important to be true to our own faith to have a strong belief system. For example, I am a Christian...100% Christian AND I can still speak with people from other religious backgrounds in a way that offers them the same respect I want them to offer me.

It’s important for me to discuss our religions in a respectful way. We can discuss our similarities and our differences without tearing each other down. We can celebrate our commonalities and respect our differences.

This is what young people are saying the Church needs to do. We need to be respectful.

Something happened that Sunday. We had a visitor attending the 10:00 service that Sunday. After the service he introduced himself as an employee of Homeland Security. I hope he didn't notice that my mouth was hanging open. I assume saw the postcard we sent to invite people to our church, or the notice on our website, informing them about the topics of our sermon series and he came to hear that one message.

He said he thanked me personally and professionally for the message I'd shared. He said more Christians and more Churches need to share this message of openness. He said one of the issues they are facing is the negative comments people are making about the Muslim faith. This is causing unrest even in our own country. He informed me that some of the first people to leave the United States and go to the Middle East to be trained as suicide bombers were from the Minneapolis area. They were 10 young second and third generation Americans.

We should never underestimate the power of our words. We need to speak with respect and treat people with respect.

Another one of the difficult conversations we've had is when Pastor Rick preached on the topic of Homosexuality. This topic made a number of people uncomfortable. A number of people came and talked with both of us about that sermon. People shared their concerns, their questions, their support, and a few people shared their stories about how this issue has affected their families and their lives.

Someone talked to me about the day that one of her friends came to her and shared her son was gay. This mother was torn by the issue and all its implications. She was confused and concerned, but she knew this news would not affect her love for her son. He was still her son. Even though she didn't understand what he was going through she knew without a doubt that she would not, could not turn her son away. She could not stop loving him.

These women supported each other through this experience. They talked for hours. They struggled and they laughed and they cried. Both women were changed through this experience. They knew they needed to change their attitudes. They knew they needed to change their approach to this issue, because they knew this young man and they loved this young man.

I think this is what young people outside the church are expecting from the Church. They want us to accept people no matter what their orientation. We don't have to understand the issue of homosexuality, or agree with someone's orientation, but young people want us to treat people, their family and their friends, with respect.

One of the things Pastor Rick asked us to do that day was to raise our hands if we knew someone who was homosexual. Do you remember how many people raised their hands? It was a large percentage of our members who raised their hands. That's one of the reasons it's always important for us to speak with respect when we talk about this issue. We could be talking about the son or daughter; the brother or sister; the aunt, uncle, cousin or friend of the person sitting next to us.

Always speak with respect when discussing this issue because it's very personal. It's all about the people we know and love.

I believe the people of this church have worked really hard to get it right. (I know there have been times when we've fallen short and we've needed to lean on the grace of God to get back on the right path. I'm in the same position.) As we've worked together during the past two years I've seen you do things the right way, with the right attitude. We've tried to make a difference in the lives of the people here at church and in our community. I'm proud to be in ministry with you through the life of this church.

And there are times when we need to give each other a gentle reminder about the difficult issues we're facing. This church should be a place where we can discuss difficult issues. This church should be a place where we're allowed to ask important questions and struggle alongside people who will give us support and encouragement...even when we disagree.

As you know, this sermon series has reflected on a book written by Adam Hamilton, called: “When Christians Get it Wrong.” In one of his chapters there is a message he received from a parishioner. First Adam writes:

“Some time ago I received an e-mail from a church member whose husband, Jerry, was in the hospital fighting for his life in a battle against cancer—a battle he has since won. Her words convey an important message for all of us:

‘I realize that you are writing about when Christians get it wrong, but I just wanted to make sure that people know what it looks like when Christians get it right. When they get it right, they send prayers through e-mail; they send silly cards and letters to the hospital to cheer you up; they move into your home and care for your children; they bring meals to you; they take your child to the emergency room at midnight; they help you assemble a Christmas gift for your children at 10 P.M. because they know you can’t do it; they travel over 1,000 miles to hold your hand when you are alone and waiting with uncertainty; they give you gift cards for gas and food; they offer to be with your dying mother until you can get there; they buy you a tree to plant in her memory after she passes; and they give you hope, courage, and strength when you can’t seem to find it on your own. Jerry and I were blessed to have been touched by Christians who did it right. We can never repay all the people who were at our side. And they don’t want us to. They did it out of love. They did it because they were Christians, and that’s what Christians do.’”

When Christians get it right we make a difference in the world. When Christians get it right we attract other people to Christ and to the Church.

This is a critical issue for us because first and foremost God has called us to be like “Salt and Light” and God has called us to make disciples of Jesus Christ. These are the most important issues.

The second reason is that our denomination, like many mainline denominations, is shrinking dramatically. It’s recently been reported that our denomination has had

21% fewer baptisms and confirmations in the last five years. In ND and SD the worship attendance has dropped by 1/3. Here at McCabe our worship attendance is approximately 75 lower than in 1976, but the community has double in that same timeframe.

It's time for us to get it right. It's time to be "Salt and Light." It's time to make disciples of Jesus Christ.