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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11C)

July 17, 2016

Text: Colossians 1:21–29

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

There's no getting around it, Christians are supposed to be different from non-Christians. Different in the sense that they have a different hope, a different guide to what is right and wrong, a different way of thinking, feeling, and living. The Christian Gospel is so transformative, that it's often described as being born again or being converted. Those are the Biblical terms that describe a monumental, life-altering change. To be born again, as John 3:7 & I Peter 1:3 declare, means that you have taken on a new life that you didn't have before. Converted simply means being changed from one thing to another; from a life of unbelief to one of faith, from spiritual death to spiritual life. In II Corinthians 16:15, Paul describes the household of Stephanas as being the "first converts of Achaia." Dear saints of God, make no mistake about it, the Bible says we should be different, different because of Jesus.

Several years ago, Christian Smith and his team of sociologist conducted a landmark study to describe the spiritual beliefs and habits of American teenagers. Smith determined that the faith of most American teenagers could best be described as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This set of beliefs goes something like this:

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.¹

This faith is "moralistic" in that people are to be good and nice to each other. But there is no real sense of absolute right and wrong. It is "therapeutic" in that it helps

¹ Cited from R. Albert Mohler, Jr. in <http://www.christianpost.com/news/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-6266/>

people to be happy and possess a positive self-esteem. But there is no sin to mourn over and repent of. This faith is “deistic” in that God exists and He created the world. But He isn’t all that important except when facing a problem. There is no need for a Savior in this faith, no sin that needs atonement, no conversion or being born again; no change of life required except for being nice to each other and feeling good about oneself. Be good, be happy, and then go to heaven.

The Bible in general, and Christian teaching in particular, teaches something quite different, something much more robust and worthy of our attention. To be blunt, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism isn’t something worth living and dying for. Today’s epistle reading from Colossians 1:21–29 describes something much more radical and life-changing. In vs. 21, Paul speaks directly to the Colossian Christians and by extension to each of us. “You”, he says. Not the people out there in the world, but to you who claim Jesus to be Lord and Savior. “You, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds...” Let’s stop there.

Did you notice the change being described? The difference from their former lives of unbelief? You, who *once were* alienated and hostile, doing evil deeds. That’s what we all were before the truth of the Gospel came to us. But the Lord’s Gospel brings about a most dramatic change. Before being baptized and coming to faith in Jesus, our hearts and minds and lives were alienated and hostile to God. We did evil deeds, says Paul. Our situation was worse than not being nice or not feeling good about ourselves.

That does not mean that non-Christians are the worst sort of evil scoundrels doing evil deeds like those that we witnessed this week in France. Far from it. Many non-Christians are very upright people. But they aren’t born again to faith in Christ Jesus. They aren’t converted to be living temples of the Holy Spirit. Their will and mind and heart are not concerned with the truth of God’s Word, nor are they eager to live a life of faith and obedience as defined by God the Father Almighty. The writer to the Hebrews says (11:6), “without faith it is impossible to please God.” Non-Christians cannot please God the Father because there is no faith in His Son, Jesus. Without faith in Jesus, nothing pleases God for without Jesus there is no forgiveness of sins, no new birth, no conversion unto eternal life.

But now that has all changed, and changed for the eternal good. Let’s turn back to Colossians 1. The object is still “You” from vs. 21 so you have to add it to vs. 22 for it to make sense, “You (it’s at the beginning for emphasis) ... he (i.e., Jesus) has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death...” Let’s stop there. The Lord Jesus did

something to change everything. Before you were hostile to God and alienated from Him. But now, through Jesus, you and every Christian has been reconciled to the Father, brought back together in harmony and love. This change occurs because Jesus took on our human flesh and blood and died.

The preaching of Jesus' death and resurrection is the proclamation that God loves this world to such an extent – that God loves you to such an extent – He died to fix everything that has gone wrong. No price was too high, not even the self-sacrifice of God the Father's only Son. That simple, powerful truth changes everything. Every human being possesses dignity and purpose because he was not only created in God's image but also loved unto eternal life. God's love in Christ is what makes us different.

Vs. 22 gives us Christ's purpose and goal in dying and rising again for His people, "in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him..." The Lord's love for you is much deeper than helping you be nice to others and feeling better about yourself. His desire is that you be holy, blameless, and beyond reproach! To be holy means to be dedicated to God, sharing in His eternal righteousness and blessedness. To be blameless means that you are so cleansed by Christ's righteousness that every sin is forgiven, every unrighteous thought, word, and deed is washed away. To be beyond reproach means that you can no longer be accused of being alienated and hostile to God and your fellow man. Through Christ Jesus, you have been changed, converted, born again unto holiness and righteousness.

That, dear saints of God, describes who we are as the Lord's baptized and beloved children. (*Savannah, we rejoice today with you in your baptism. For you have received this life changing gift from our Lord Jesus Christ: His love, forgiveness, holiness, and eternal life. You are born again unto a living hope in Christ Jesus. That hope can never be taken away from you.*) But all of us need encouragement as we live out this blessed and holy life of faith in Christ. Vs. 23 provides a gentle but firm reminder that we must remain faithful in this life of faith, "if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister." This, in part, is why we the Church gathers together week after week: to give encouragement to Christ's beloved children so that they can remain strong and faithful in the Gospel.

There is so much that is discouraging: the evils and misfortunes of the world, the disappointments of our own lives, our sins and mistakes. And we mustn't forget that

the devil, according to Rev. 12:10, is the great accuser of God's people. He and his demons are constantly reminding us of our sins. But this congregation and I, as her pastor, are here to remind you that Christ Jesus has reconciled you unto God the Father through His death. Be reminded and so encouraged in the truth of the Gospel: Christ Jesus has done everything necessary to present you holy, blameless, and above reproach to His heavenly Father. Remain steadfast and immovable in that baptismal hope. It was the Gospel of the Lord Jesus that reconciled you to the Father. The same Gospel will keep you steadfast and firm in the faith all the days of your life. You are a child of God, forgiven and cleansed, even when you struggle with sin, even when doubts plague your thoughts, even when your world is falling apart. You are God's beloved people.

We won't have the opportunity to consider vs. 24–29. But I do want to offer one last word of encouragement found in vs. 27, “To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” The baptismal inheritance you have received is great and rich, says Paul. That inheritance is Christ in you, the hope of glory. The Lord Jesus remains with you and in you unto the resurrection of glory on the Last Day.

That's what makes you, and every Christian, different. Christ Jesus is in you unto eternal glory. So rejoice in being different. Live out your most holy faith in loving service to one another. Find joy and peace, not so much in feeling good about yourself, but in the eternal love that God gives in Christ Jesus. He remains with you always, in good and bad times, always working His loving and saving purposes in your life. Rejoice and be encouraged dear saints of God.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.