

January 12, 2014

Being Community: A community centered in *Jesus Christ*

John 17: 1-26; Colossians 2: 6-7; Ephesians 3: 14-19 – (*The Message*)

We begin a series that will take us into an depth look into our vision statement.

“As a living body of Jesus Christ, our vision at North Suburban Mennonite Church is to be a Christ-centered community, embodying Christ-like compassion, living with Christ-led courage.”

This statement is one that caught my attention when Lynne and I first came to NSMC.

I thought to myself, “I want to be part of a community that professes this as their vision!”

I still do!

Have you given thought to:

How this vision fits into your life?

How this vision shapes us as a community?

How this vision challenges us as we seek to participate with God in God’s mission of making all things new?

We begin today (and for the next few weeks) with looking at our being Christ-centered community.

This simple statement is expanded – to help us flesh out what it means for us to be a Christ-centered community.

“To be a Christ-centered community, we will be a committed, nurturing Anabaptist community, which celebrates our unity in Christ in the midst of the diversity of God's family. We will support each other in our spiritual, human and material needs.

We will challenge each other to faithful living. We will maintain open communication with each other in a spirit of love and respect. We will commit to spiritual discipline to further our relationship with God.”

Over the next few Sundays we will chew on each of these phrases.

Today, I am inviting us to reflect on what it means for us being a community centered in Jesus Christ?

My daughter Hilary saved someone’s life this week.

She was floated from ICU to the West Tower at Condell.

As she was charting, she noticed a monitor out of the corner of her eye of a patient who was not her responsibility, which showed a heart almost not beating.

She jumped up and ran down the hallway to the patient’s room, noticed that he was gray and unresponsive – no detectable pulse, as family members were sleeping nearby.

She started chest compressions, shouted out loud “code blue” to get the attention of other nursing staff, family members woke up in shock to the commotion.

The crash cart arrived and the patient was revived.

Her presence there was a God-thing

– she and the other ICU nurse who floated with her knew to act quickly

– he was second one at the room when he saw Hilary sprinting down the corridor.

I am so proud of her – doing what God has gifted and called her to do.

We may not regard ministry in the same league as life-saving medicine

– **but being the community of God, participating with God in ministry is the same kind of healing, life-saving, life-creating presence in a broken and hurting world**

Being a community centered in Christ Jesus sets us apart as a community that lives to bring life, abundant life, to others in a world full of that which steals, kills and destroys.

Over break, I had conversations with a number of our college students.

The conversations I had with both Alia and Philip involved questions about their identity as “Christians.”

In encountering other expressions of faith, what does it mean to be Christian?

Is it a being rooted in doctrine, holding to a certain set of beliefs, or is it more than that?

In our talking we wondered about what it meant to be loving human beings?

I reminded them of a sermon I had preached a few years ago: “Why I am no longer a Christian.”

What I expressed was that I found the Christian identifier as being too polarizing vis-à-vis persons who identify themselves as Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or even atheist.

Being Christian has too many political connotations in our global world

– imbued with too much history which has been domineering and controlling.

And so what I stated was: “I no longer like to identify myself as a Christian, but rather, I identify myself as a human being who follows Christ, because in Jesus I am growing into the fullness of all what it means to be humane and human.”

Steve Bevens, a Catholic missiologist, has expressed that we best understand Jesus relationship with God, not by asking, “how is Jesus like God, but in discovering that in Scripture we discover that God is like Jesus” – that is what John 1 reveals

– Jesus came to share the fullness of God with us

– God is like Jesus.

Similarly, in taking a cue from Bevens, how are we to understand our being human?

Especially in light of Augustine who expressed: “our heart is restless until it rests in God”

Or, in light of Eugene Peterson’s statement, “we discover what it is to be fully human only in relationship with God.”

In God taking on our humanity in Jesus Christ, it is not a matter of asking “how is Jesus like us, but rather, in centering ourselves in Jesus, **we discover that to be human is to be like Jesus.**”

To come to such an understanding – that to be human is to be like Jesus
– readily reveals that to be a Christ-centered community requires much more than believing something about Jesus, or even believing in Jesus
– i.e., something we can give rationale assent to.

Though that is important, rationale assent is not the foundation of our being in Christ.

Rather, it is what David Augsburger expresses in *Dissident Discipleship*, “to be centered in Christ is to be radically connected to Jesus, to believe Jesus, and to believe what Jesus believes.”

It is being in relationship with Jesus;
Connected to the life of Jesus,
Experiencing a living relationship with Christ Jesus.

It is the living Spirit of Christ alive in us.

Though we give expression to what this relationship looks like through belief statements and “about” statements, **what identifies us as being Christ-centered, is that we are in relationship with Jesus, and the Spirit of Jesus Christ is alive in us** – alive and active in our lives.

And that is how I pray for each of us
– for us to grow in being alive in Jesus Christ
– because as we grow in Jesus, we become human in the ways Jesus was human.

And so, along with Paul, my prayer is this
– for each one of us who make it our confession that we are a Christ-centered community:

“I pray that out of his glorious riches, God may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts. And I pray that you being rooted and established in love (the way Jesus expresses how we are to be human) may have power together with all the Lord’s people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

To be a Christ-centered community is to be a community that expresses, demonstrates, **lives out the loving humanity of Jesus Christ in the world.**

Therefore, to be a Christ-centered community **is a way of life**
– much more than a way of believing.

To be a Christ-centered community is to be:

A life-centered community
A death-opposing community

A peace-centered community
An oppression-opposing community
A racism-opposing community
A violence-opposing community

A hope-centered community
A love-centered community
A joy-centered community

Because to be centered in relationship with Christ in the midst of all our humanity is to be such a community of character in the world

And this is what we hear in Jesus' prayer as he prayed for us in his high priestly prayer in John 17 before his crucifixion and resurrection
– in which he prays concerning himself in the third person.

John 17:2 “O God, you put him in charge of everything human, so he might give real life, eternal life (i.e., not merely life after death, but to taste life that is always life) . . . so that he might give life to all in his charge”

“And what is this life, this eternal, this always life?
– but to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”

To “know” is much more than intellectual assent
– it is an intimate relationship; it is to be connected, in relationship with the One who is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all that is life!

And Jesus prays for each one of us to be a people, to be a community who experience the fullness of this intimate relationship with God
– so as to participate with God in God's creating, redeeming and sustaining presence in the world.

And so for us to be a Christ-centered community
– is to be fully engaged with the Life that is God in the world.

In the midst of all that stands in opposition to life in this world
– death, oppression, discouragement, violence, alienation, racism, sexism,
– we being a Christ-centered community shout out that we are a community that opts for life,
– that reveals life,
– that works for life to break forth out of death,
– in the same way that Jesus did.

This is what it means to be missional
Our mission continues the life-revealing, life-giving, life overcoming death, ministry of Jesus,
- by being the community of Jesus in the world!

This is what it means to be alive as human beings
– being a living community
– a community centered in Jesus Christ!

This is the benediction I leave with you (from *The Message*) - Col. 2:6

“As you received Christ Jesus, the Master, now *live* him. You're deeply rooted in him. You're well constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start *living* it!”

“You don’t need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power (and presence) extends over everything (in order to endow all creation everywhere with life”

– to infect all with life that breaks forth from the creative living presence of God!)

Amen.