

“IS THE CHURCH READY FOR CHRISTMAS?”

Advent 3-B December 14, 2008

Mark 13:32-37

Introduction:

Our lessons today call us to receive God’s joy: (read verses). They are also a call to the church during this season of Advent to prepare ourselves for the return of Jesus Christ. It is a call for the church to be diligent and vigilant as we watch for Jesus. Is the church ready for Christmas? As we examine this issue or preparedness, let’s look at three questions. The first question is

Have We Been Faithful In Declaring To The World The Good News That Jesus Christ Is Lord?

The first responsibility of the Church is to spread the Gospel, the Good News of God’s love fleshed out in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament says that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself; and to us has been given the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). That God would want to be reconciled to sinners is good news, don’t you think? And it is also good news that God is calling us to be partners with Him in this ministry of reconciliation. Therefore, are we faithful in spreading this good news?

As a pastor I think I worry more about our faithfulness in telling people about Jesus than any other aspect of our corporate life. I believe, if we are faithful in

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proclaiming the Good News, then everything else will take care of itself. I believe God will honor our legitimate efforts to introduce people to Jesus by taking care of all our other needs.

My worry is that we might succumb to the temptation to assume that anyone here must have already invited Jesus to be their Savior. Our responsibility is to be faithful to this first call on our corporate life. This means we must be diligent and faithful in taking every opportunity we have to tell children, youth, and adults the great Good News of what happened on that first Christmas; and what the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ means to the world and can mean to each person individually.

Our responsibility is to share the story: to ring the bells, sing the songs, and tell the story. It is God's responsibility to convict the hearts and minds of those who hear the story that they too need a relationship with Jesus.

Sometimes we get discouraged in our attempts to share the blessing we have received. The world seems to close its ears to our message. As someone once put it, *"People want a church in their community, but they don't want Jesus"*. That is how many people feel about the church. They want to know it is there even though many will never attend nor feel any responsibility for its support. They

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want to know the church will be there in case of an emergency, just don't ask them to become personally active.

It is our responsibility, however, to keep spreading the word, trusting that one day our faithfulness will bear fruit. So that is the first question we need to answer as we – the church – prepare for Christmas. Have we been faithful in declaring the good news to our community that Jesus Christ has come into our world once as a baby, and will be returning as the Lord of all the earth?

Here is the second question:

Have We Been Faithful In Developing Bonds of Love Within Our Church Family?

At our best the church is a “Koinonia” – a fellowship of love. There should be a love within the souls of the members of the church for each other that the world cannot know because it is a love that is given us from God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps you remember a Peanuts Cartoon from a number of years ago when Snoopy had broken his left leg. Hundreds wrote letters to Snoopy or sent sympathy cards. Snoopy himself philosophized about his plight while perched on top of his doghouse, looking at his huge leg cast. *“My body blames my foot for not being able to go places. My foot says it was my head’s fault, and my head blames my*

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eyes. My eyes say my feet are clumsy, and my right foot says not to blame him for what my left foot did..." Snoopy looks out at his audience and confesses, *"I don't say anything because I don't want to get involved"*.

Could that be a parable for what sometimes happens within the church? We read in 1 Corinthians 12:21, that we are like a body: *"The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you."* God has called us to be a family, a fellowship, a community of faith. But sometimes we just don't want to get involved in the problems of others. We don't want to go the extra mile in order to identify with the suffering of our sister or brother. As we prepare ourselves for the return of Christ, as we celebrate the good news that "love came down at Christmas", let's remind ourselves of how important the ties are that bind us together within the church.

A word of grace to our visitors today: This church is wonderful in its caring for each other. However, we are not perfect. We are not as good as we will be next week, nor are we as bad as the critics of the church would have you believe. If you are looking for a good place to grow in your spiritual life I highly commend Holy Cross Church to you.

The church, at its best, is a microcosm of what the kingdom of heaven will be like. When we sing and pray and

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rejoice together in spirit and in truth, in true fellowship and love; when we rightly consecrate and share the sacrament of Holy Communion, we are experiencing a foretaste of the glory that lies beyond the pale of human flesh.

Is the church ready for Christmas? Have we been faithful in telling our world the good news of God in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself? Have we been faithful in developing bonds of love within our fellowship?

When it was announced that Deacon Betty would have to go to Moffitt for surgery I happened to overhear several people offer to drive her, pick her up, feed her cats, bring in her mail, take out her garbage – whatever they could do to help her. Here is another thing we do, that we are working on doing better: someone from our congregation takes communion from this service to others who are unable to be here because we want to share this tangible evidence of God’s love for us through Jesus Christ. These are examples of a church family loving its neighbor as Christ loves us. Mother Teresa once said that, *“Love, to be real, must hurt. It must empty us of ourselves.”* Again: *“Love, to be real, must hurt. It must empty us of ourselves.”*

Here is our last question:

Have We Been Faithful In Our Service To The World?

When they laid the first transatlantic cable to

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Europe the question was, “What should be the first message sent to test if the cable is working?” They chose the familiar verse, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, good will toward all.”*

Advent ought to remind us of our responsibility to the world outside these walls – that we are to be part of the solution for peace and good will. Those are needs that only the church of Jesus Christ can provide. Holy Cross is a new church in the process of seeking God’s will for so that we can fully determine our specific ministry in the future. However, even while we are rebuilding we are consciously trying to serve our world.

If you look in our Narthex there is a display representing our commitment to the Pregnancy Center. If you were here last month you heard Rev. Robert Mbinda tell us about the work of Good Samaritan Orphanage in Tanzania that we help support. Then there is our involvement with Angel Tree Ministry. I hope all of you signed up to support one of the teams that will each be supporting one child. Also, I’m looking for a school, or a feeding ministry, we can support next year by bringing can goods to church on the first Sunday of each month.

But, perhaps our most consistent involvement in our world is through our sponsorship of both a Cub Scout

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Pack and a Boy Scout Troop. Not only are we providing the space for them to hold their meeting we are also deeply involved in helping these young men work for their *God and Country Awards*. Deacon Betty is teaching the curriculum for the Cubs, and Hal Cory and James Cobb – our Junior Warden – are teaching the Boy Scouts. Through this effort we hope to be able to introduce some young people to Jesus Christ, and maybe help some families find a church home.

If we make ourselves available to God for service God will lead us to something we can do that will make a difference. If we who are the church would trust God enough by taking our best efforts out into the world, no matter how strained or inadequate it might seem to us, God will provide the rich background music to make this a better and more beautiful world – in Christ's name! Can you make a difference?

It was Dwight Moody who said, *"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And that which I can do, by the grace of God, I will do."* With that simple commitment God used him to bring revival to England and America.

Is the church ready for Christmas, for the return of Christ? Have we been faithful in telling the story, in building our love for one another, and in service to the world? If we

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have, this could be the best Christmas of all time.