



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Being the Church

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

Last week our Session welcomed twelve new young people from the fall confirmation class as active members of Westminster. I heard myself saying to them, “Don’t just *come* to church; *be* the church.” The more I thought about it afterward, the more I thought that’s a message for all of us, not just for the confirmands.

Of course we talk about “going to church,” and there’s nothing wrong with that. We might ask a friend, “Where do you go to church?” Or we say, “I was sick last week and I couldn’t go to church.” That’s all right. But it’s also true that some people go to church the way they go to a concert, or a baseball game, or their kids’ soccer games. They go as spectators, as people who watch what’s going on, not as participants engaged in the action.

Lots of people go to church infrequently, of course, maybe just Christmas and Easter, and whatever that means to them, it’s hardly like being an active member of the community of faith. Some people go to church regularly, but only in certain seasons. It’s almost like having season tickets to the Pirates, except that the seasons are reversed and they take the summer off. If you

like baseball enough you might want to go to as many games as possible, but even most season ticket holders would not say that baseball is the center of their life and shapes who they are as a human being. It would be rather sad if they did, actually. Baseball is just a spectator sport, after all, and most people's lives are shaped by more important things.

The church is different from these other kinds of activities, or at least it should be. The church of Jesus Christ isn't something we go to as spectators if we're serious about being a Christian. When Jesus calls his disciples, he doesn't say, "Sit in the stands and watch what I do and maybe you'll get something out of it." No. Jesus tells the fishermen, "Follow me, and I'll teach you to fish for people." He tells the tax collector with spongy ethical boundaries, "Come with me, and you'll see people and things in a whole new light." He tells sinners, "I don't condemn you, but you need to stop doing that. Go and sin no more." He tells anyone who will listen, "You're so much more than the worst thing you've ever done, but you're not nearly what you could be, so let the Spirit of God give you a whole new life."

For those who really hear what Jesus says, and believe him, becoming his disciple changes everything. A "disciple" is one who lives under a certain discipline, a life-shaping pattern of being and doing. That's why Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." The church, when it's true to its calling, is the community of people who want to follow Jesus. We may just "go to church" in the beginning, but when we discover what it's really about and start to follow Jesus as our Lord and

Savior, church is no longer just something we *go to* but something we *become*. Jesus calls us out of the stands, onto the field, and into the action.

So what does it mean to *be* the church?

First of all, the church is the body of Christ—a community of people who want to be faithful to God as Jesus himself embodies that faithfulness. The Marine Corps motto is *Semper fi*, short for *Semper fidelis*, which is Latin for “Always faithful.” In a sense, it could also be a motto of the church. At Christmastime we sing *Adeste fidelis*, “O come, all ye faithful,” because the church is a body of believers who want to be faithful to God as we know God in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh.

Now the truth is, we’re not very good at being faithful to God, left to our own devices. We all start out with other interests, and our agendas often get in the way of God’s agenda. That means the church is a body of people who know their own shortcomings, and our confession of sin makes us humble before God and more charitable toward others. It’s harder to be self-righteous when you know that you’re really not all that righteous anyway. Fans of the British series *Downton Abbey* may have heard the wonderful line from Maggie Smith’s character last week when, in the middle of an argument with some of her peers, she asked, “Tell me, does it ever get cold up there on the moral high ground?”

We’re not very good at being faithful by ourselves, but God does not leave us to our own devices. Being the

church means we know our shortcomings, but we also know the grace of God that forgives us and the power of the Holy Spirit that makes us new. God can do all kinds of things through us that we can't do on our own. God can take away our addictions to power and praise and prosperity as well as all sorts of substances, and free us to live in peace and joy and contentment.

Then, because we know ourselves to be sinners forgiven by the grace of God, we learn to see all kinds of people in a different light. "From now on we regard no one from a human point of view," Paul says. Human beings in their natural state are always on the lookout for identity markers. That's probably a vestige of our evolutionary past, where determining who belongs to my tribe and who might belong to a hostile tribe had some survival value. Nothing comes more naturally to us than to define ourselves according to the groups we belong to: family, tribe, race, religion, and nation.

One of the most striking things about Jesus was how he came to break those barriers down. Once, when he was talking to a crowd, someone came to him and said, "Your mother and your brothers are wanting to speak to you." But Jesus pointed to his disciples and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Even the family, the most basic in-group we have, Jesus redefined in a profoundly metaphorical way, in terms of our faithfulness to God.

When Jesus summarized the great commandment to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves,

someone asked him “And who is my neighbor?” hoping for a conveniently narrow definition. Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Precisely because his Jewish audience regarded the Samaritans as a different and hostile tribe, Jesus made an alien the hero of his story. It was the Samaritan, the one who is “not like us,” that helped the victim alongside the road after the priest and another one of his own people passed by indifferently on the other side.

Later on, after a great deal of debate that stretched their notion of who God’s people really are, the first Jewish Christians decided that even Gentiles, even those who were not good Jews like themselves, people in fact like you and me, could respond to the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ and become faithful Christians. So Paul could write to the Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

The whole movement of the early church was to break down barriers and set aside identity markers so that anyone at all could see the love of Christ in the community of his disciples and be welcomed by them. How ironic, then, that some Christians today are quick to stereotype and exclude and even conjure up hostility against anyone that they think is not like them.

In our day, Muslims especially are singled out by some as the Other, as people not like us—people to exclude and keep away and be presumptively afraid of. The recent shootings in California by a Muslim couple

under the influence of the thuggish and evil group called ISIS has fueled anti-Muslim hysteria, when in fact the proportion of mass shootings in America carried out by Muslims is actually smaller than the proportion of Muslims in our population as a whole.

We Christians think it's an absurd caricature of our faith when atheists, for example, try to reduce Christianity to the Crusades and the Inquisition and religious wars and slavery and segregation—even though all those things have in fact been part of Christian history. We know our faith is better than that, and we of all people ought to know that religion should not be defined by the worst things that some people do who claim to follow it.

There was a story in the paper just before Christmas about a busload of people in Kenya who were stopped and threatened by a group of armed Somali militants. The gunmen clambered on board the bus and demanded that the passengers sort themselves out into two groups: Muslims and everyone else. In the last year there had been a similar incident in the same region, where non-Muslims had been separated out and killed. But this time, the Muslims on the bus refused to be separated from their fellow passengers. Some of the Muslims even slipped their own religious attire to the non-Muslims so they could not be easily identified. A few people were shot before the raid was broken up when another vehicle arrived that the attackers thought was the police, and so they fled. A Muslim man from the bus later told reporters, “The militants threatened to shoot us but we still refused and protected our brothers and sisters”—and by “brothers and sisters” they meant their

non-Muslim neighbors.

What is that, if not a contemporary Good Samaritan story of the sort that Jesus told, except that it isn't a parable, but something that actually happened not long ago?

This is the weekend when our country remembers Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the long struggle we've had to come to terms with our own history of slavery and segregation and injustices of all kinds based on claims about who is like us and who is not. Some of us were at the seminary yesterday for a program on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian who stood against the tide in the 1930s and 40s when most of the German Protestant church let nationalism and racism trump their Christian commitment as they cast their lot with the Nazis and joined in the hateful campaign against their Jewish fellow citizens. Bonhoeffer was inspired in part by his visit to America in 1930 and 1931, when he saw the vitality of the African American churches in the midst of discrimination and suffering, and he returned to Germany with a growing conviction of the power of Christ to stand up against evil wherever it strikes, and no matter whom it singles out as its scapegoats and victims.

We are the church, the true church, of Jesus Christ when we care for one another, within the community of faith and beyond. When we pray for one another and support each other in times of personal need, we are being the church that Jesus would have us be. And when we share in outreach to people beyond our congregation, including people from all sorts of other backgrounds, we're

being the church Jesus calls us to be.

The true church of Jesus Christ is not afraid, even when bad things are going on around us. It is not focused entirely on itself, or indifferent to the needs of other people. It does not use identity markers to single out individuals or whole groups of people for suspicion or resentment or hostility.

The true church of Jesus Christ is strong and brave and compassionate, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be ambassadors for Christ, ministers of God's reconciling love. Let us then be all of those things together. Let us be the church.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org