

CHRISTIAN IS MORE THAN A NAME

John 2: 12 – 22 March 15, 2009

Reverend Bud Precise

What does it mean to be Christian? In 1947, President Harry Truman wrote to Pope Pius XII, "This is a Christian nation." Truman did not mean that the United States had an official or legally preferred religion or church. And I doubt he intended to slight adherents of non-Christian traditions. He did recognize that this nation, its institutions and laws was founded on biblical principles basic to Christianity and to Judaism from which it flowed. Some 84 percent of Americans claim to be Christian.

Today we gather to worship in a nation that sometimes calls itself a "Christian Nation." You can find a lively debate on the internet about the pros and cons of that concept. I do know that when the supreme court justices take the bench, the 10 commandments are still on the wall behind them. Our coins say, "In God we trust." And we inserted "Under God" in our pledge of allegiance in 1954. But I doubt that makes us Christian.

What does it mean to be A Christian Nation? We Christians are a numerical majority, but we know we don't always act and think like Christians. A journalist, Bill McKibben, writing in Harpers Magazine in 2005 reported that less than 40% of Americans could name more than 4 of the 10 commandments we just read. I am not sure that being able to name them is as important as living them. If we don't know them we have slim chance of living them. More troubling is that he reported that 75% of Americans believe that Bible teaches that "God helps those who help themselves." That quote is from deist, Benjamin Franklin, not from the Bible. In fact, that is a very unbiblical idea. It is very different from the words of Jesus, "You will love your neighbor as yourself." 75% of us Christians in America claim to pray to God daily, yet only 33 % make it to worship each week. In 2004, America ranked 2nd to last among developed countries in foreign aid. Per person we provide 15 cents a day in development assistance to poor countries. Our charitable giving increased our daily donation by just 6 pennies to 21 cents daily. And it is not that we are taking care of our own. Nearly 18% of American children live in poverty (8% in Sweden)." Households that were "fool insecure with hunger" climbed more than 26% between 1999 and 2003. And that 6th commandment about not killing --- our murder rate is 5 times that of our European peers.

"It's your money. You've earned it. Use it when you want to." You know that commercial. The popular gospel of today does not seem to be "Love your neighbor." The message we most often from our culture is "Love yourself." And we have spent and borrowed as much as we can for ourselves. Just check your investments, read the paper or listen to what dominates the news. Our soaring government and personal debt will confirm that

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

Now, I am not sure you can use any group of statistics to prove – or unprove- that we are a Christian Nation. Here we are in the season of Lent. We are trying to honestly close the gap between our ways and God’s ways. One of the things we do every Sunday - and especially during Lent is lay the scripture alongside our lives. We ask ourselves just how Christian we really are. And our text for today speaks to our commitment. This story of Jesus cleansing the temple is in all the gospels – all 4 of them. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story is at the end of the ministry of Jesus. And that is probably where it belongs. I doubt the event happened twice.

And it is difficult to see how the Jewish religious authorities would have tolerated such a confrontational act at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. I think John moves the event to the first of his gospel to serve a symbolic function. This story follows the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana. John wants to reveal the grace and glory of Jesus and the abundant new life that Jesus offers. We look at the cleansing of the temple and often we focus on the money changers cheating the pilgrims who had come to Passover. And they were cheating them. Most of the pilgrim traveled a great distance and would not have brought animals with them. They would need to buy animals in Jerusalem in order to participate in the temple worship. The temple had an agreement with the Romans that the coins used in the temple had to be Jewish coins. The temple tax could not be paid in Greek or Roman coins. Why? Because those coins had a human image (the emperor’s head) on them. For the temple to remain open, for it to be successful, they had to get the money made from the tax for exchanging the coins from the street (Roman or Greek) coins. And they needed to make a good profit on the animals they sold to be used as sacrifices.

I believe that Jesus is not just confronting the abuse of the temple tax and the high prices for the animals. Mark and Luke do focus on the distortion of a place of worship into a “den of robbers.” But John is going to the heart of the meaning of what is it to be religious. “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.” I believe that Jesus was aware of the temple tax and the high prices for the animals used to offer as a sacrifice. But I believe that Jesus angry because religion has turned into a profit making enterprise – like a market place. The religious authorities at the temple had forgotten what it means to be followers of God. They were more interested in profit than in justice and mercy. How are we Christian? Well, it is more than a name or a word. Christian is someone who follows Jesus. I think reading the bible, praying, worship, offerings, singing, sermons, - all those things are important. They help us work at what it means to be Christian. The 10 commandments are there to help us live as a community of the people of God.

- Whatever else you do, don’t forget to worship God. It will help you remember who you are.
- Whatever else you do, don’t put anything in the place of God. You will be worshipping an idol.
- Whatever else you do, don’t promise something in God’s name and then fail to keep your promise.
- Whatever else you do, keep the Sabbath. Stop what you are doing and rest.
- Whatever else you do, honor your father and mother. It will help you remember who you are.
- Whatever else you do, do not murder. It will destroy community.
- Whatever else you do, do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not covet. It will destroy community.

Being and acting and living go together. Jesus is asking us to be faithful to the very core of our faith. Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

PILGRIM

CHURCH

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

Christianity is not selling religious trinkets and bibles. Christianity has to do with the attitude in our hearts and our way of living. Lent is reminding us to check on our relationship to God and our neighbor.