

Sermon for Sunday, July 3, 2016

"MARKED BY THE CROSS"

When my daughters were little, they engaged in a most curious habit which I hope is shared by all children. Every time they incurred the smallest, most insignificant cut on their bodies, they felt compelled to show me. "Look Daddy, I have an ow-ie." Why they were so eager to reveal their wounds to me, I could never fathom. Those nicks and bruises hardly measured up to the "red badge of courage." But they did represent evidence of their engagement with the world, a world that has the unfortunate capacity to cut, nick, bruise and otherwise injure every one of us.

Any person born on this earth, must be engaged with the world, and contend with the threat of being wounded in the process. The question which the apostle Paul invites us to consider as among the most important we will ever answer, is whether we will be engaged "by" the world, or "with" the world. The difference between the two makes little sense to the unbelieving, but constitutes the very glory of God to the faithful in Christ.

Let us begin by admitting that Christians do not have a lock on the doing of good deeds. Lots of people who have never darkened the door of a Christian church are good people. In fact, to our consternation, some of them are very good people, who, the lack of faith notwithstanding, act in a very "Christian" manner. And those who like to measure the church by the goodness of its members always find the church wanting.

Yet good works have always been a measure by which you and I, and the church have been evaluated. Why? Because as Paul reminds us, "God is not mocked," for we reap whatever we sow. We have not been forgiven in Christ to remain as we are, but to allow God's gracious love to transform us into new creatures, whose faith is expressed in good works.

The critical difference however, in the performance of good works between the people of the world and the people of God, is the motivation. If we are engaged "by" the world, we do good works to justify ourselves. A contribution to help the hungry makes us feel good about ourselves and we pat ourselves on the back. A day contributed to building a home for Habitat for Humanity makes us feel as if we have made a good showing of our faith. Tutoring the less privileged allows us to look kindly upon the goodness of our own hearts. But all too soon, we start to sound like the Pharisee who prayed, "Thank you God that I am not like other people."

When we are engaged "by" the world, we measure ourselves by its standards. That allows us two benefits. One is that we can boast about ourselves, about how good we are. The second, is that we can avoid the world's condemnation and rebuke. We do that by doing those good deeds that are widely acknowledged as acceptable, like feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, and avoiding those that are not, like offering assistance to Muslim refugees or welcoming with open arms members of the LGBTQ community. People prayed for Paris, for instance, and a little less prayed for Orlando, but have they prayed for Istanbul and Baghdad at all?

If, on the other hand, we are engaged "with" the world through our faith, we do good works to glorify our Lord Jesus Christ. Writes Paul—in capital letters so the Christians in Galatia will know that it is important—"May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14). Paul is not engaged "by" the world, but "with" the world through Christ. The world has been crucified to him. It no longer acts authoritatively for him or determines his status. Paul boasts only in the cross of Christ. He lives to serve as Christ served, offering himself up out of love for God, and out of love for neighbors to whom God's grace and forgiveness has been freely given.

Martin Luther in his lectures on Galatians, expressed beautifully what it means to walk in this Spirit:

If there is anything in us, it is not our own; it is a gift of God. But if it is a gift of God, then it is entirely a debt one owes to love, that is, to the law of Christ. And if it is a debt owed to love, then I must serve others with it, not myself. Thus my learning is not my own; it belongs to the unlearned and is the debt I owe them. My chastity is not my own; it belongs to those who commit sins of the flesh, and I am obligated to serve them through it by offering it to God for them, by sustaining and excusing them, and thus with my respectability, veiling their shame before God and [humankind].... Thus my wisdom belongs to the foolish, my power to the oppressed. Thus my wealth belongs to the poor, my righteousness to the sinners.... It is with all these qualities that we must stand before God and intervene on behalf of those who do not have them, as though clothed with someone else's garment.... But even before [others] we must, with the same love, render them service against their detractors and those who are violent toward them; for this is what Christ did for us (Luther's Works, "Lectures on Galatians-1519," vol. 27, p. 393).

As disciples of Christ we are not to be "of" the world, but we are to be "in" it. We are not to be engaged "by" the world, but we are to be engaged "with" the world, as much and in the same way Christ was engaged "with" the world. We cannot flee from the world; we must still contend with it. But we are to do so under the shadow of the cross, living our lives in a "crucified" relationship to it. For us, as for Paul, the world is no longer authoritative for us or determines our status. We are God's through faith in Jesus Christ, citizens of heaven.

Now, living lives of freedom *from* the world and daring to serve all our neighbors in need with the Spirit of Christ, will bring us into conflict with the world, and we will suffer the world's condemnation. We can confine our faith values to the religious community and remain relatively safe, but the "crucified life" is meant to alter our relationship to the world. Lived in the world, our faith will come in conflict with it. You can count on it. When it happens to you, then like Paul, you will know what it is to be branded with the marks of Jesus. Then you will know that you too have been marked by the cross.

Years ago, John Fife, the pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, found himself confronted with the suffering and the needs of thousands of refugees from the politically tumultuous countries of El Salvador and Guatemala. In Christian love, he offered them the sanctuary of the church as they fled from certain death.

In connection with that work of love, he was convicted on federal charges and given five-years' probation, because the government claimed the refugees were economic not political. In the long run, however, he was vindicated. The First Amendment rights of churches were upheld against government surveillance of worship services, the issues and goals of the Sanctuary Movement were upheld in two other court cases and all those refugees refused asylum were invited to re-apply. John Fife, engaged himself *with* the world on behalf of Christ, and he suffered for it. He was marked by the cross. Christ was glorified when later, we elected him the moderator of our General Assembly.

We are citizens of God's new creation, God's new order which is transforming the old order through faith in Christ. Living in the new creation involves finding a way of regarding people differently than in the old order, where race, nationality, sexual orientation, political persuasion, religion, economics, and the like provide categories by which individuals and groups are valued. It means regarding people instead as neighbors to be cared for, as recipients of a service offered in love, as those for whom God's mercy is freely given.

Paul reminds us that we are to be a people who are marked by the cross, who show signs of the Crucified One in our lives. No doubt when Paul boasted of being branded with the marks of Christ, he was revealing some of the injuries he had received from being engaged "with" the world in Jesus' name. But we don't *seek* to be in conflict with the world. We just seek to love it as did our Lord Jesus Christ, and not for our sakes, but for his sake. That love inevitably invites us to take up the cross and bear its marks upon our bodies, marks of rejection and shame, pain and heartache, suffering and rebuke, even death. It is utter foolishness to the world, but it is the wisdom of God to those who are called, because when we are crucified to the world, we discover the joy, the peace, the power, and the glory of new life, even eternal life, in communion with God's Spirit.

PRAYER: Almighty God, may we live in such communion with you through faith, that we too are marked by the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, to his everlasting glory. In his name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Mark P. Thomas
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
St. Louis, Missouri
Galatians 6:7-18
July 3, 2016