

Sunday February 20, 2022 Epiphany 7 Identified as Christian

I Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-50 Luke 6:27-38

When you hear the word “Christian” what does this mean to you? People who identify themselves as Christian believe in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth who was promised by God to die and rise again for their sakes. Christianity is the world's largest religion, with about 2.5 billion followers. Christians make up a majority of the population in 157 countries and territories. Those who follow Jesus believe that he is the Son of God, whose coming as the messiah was prophesied in the Hebrew Bible (called the Old Testament in Christianity), and chronicled in the New Testament.

But how do you define a Christian? Or might I ask, do you define yourself as a Christian or not? The answer is one based upon belief and putting this belief into action. Jesus taught his followers many things about how to live but most importantly, he taught them how to love.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians are reminders of what he taught this young church of believers about life and death and eternal life. He explains that new life comes from death—think about a seed, which is planted; when growth begins the outer shell falls away and goes into the ground. The new plant emerges and grows up and through the dirt towards the sun. This is new life emerging. Jesus died and was buried. But as the prophets foretold, Jesus rose to new life. How do we understand this for ourselves? This is one of the key beliefs of Christians, that there is life after death, that there is a promised home in heaven and that we will be with God, Jesus and Spirit for evermore.

When we choose to follow Jesus we must let go our old ways of life. Instead of our lives focused on me and my—it is on Jesus and God- His and God's alone! To what might we do for His sake and glory? How do we give to God our lives without counting the cost?

This is also a key teaching of Christianity that God is trinity- three in one- Father, Son and Spirit. For when we see God in three persons, His Presence just makes more sense—God is Father—Creator; Son- Jesus, both human and divine and Spirit. All existing as One God.

Yet who are we as Christians? What are we called to do? There are many symbols of Christianity. Some might be identified by their shape, the movement they entail or just their general function. These include the cross, the descending dove, the anchor, as well as a fish. The fish was because the first followers of Jesus were fishers. Jesus called to them to follow him to become fishers of people, and they did. The descending dove recalls the story of Jesus' baptism when a dove flew down over Jesus as he rose up out of the Jordan River and was

baptized. This represents the presence of God's Spirit. The anchor is often used to symbolize God's might and power which cannot be changed. The cross is one of the most recognized symbols for Christians even though it is also a symbol death. It was on a cross that Jesus, the Son of God, died and after burial, he arose to new life. The cross is empty in our Protestant tradition because Jesus is alive and is with us now. How we understand the cross in our faith is that Jesus died once for us all; we have hope because of His resurrection.

Jesus continuing his teaching on the hillside shares his key lessons on getting along with others. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. He then gives examples about how to love- and then the key statement is "Do to others as you would have them do to you." If you love those who love you— all is good. But, even sinners love those who love them. But to love your enemies, you should expect nothing in return. Your reward will be great and you will be children of God.

How is this possible? TO love enemies and yet know Jesus' call for us to serve others is to love as Christ does? Just think of the last time you had a disagreement with someone. What occurred? Depending upon who it was- a family member, work colleague or friend, how was their reconciliation? What did it mean to share and show love? How does God call us to be serve? Now, this was a person you knew and cared for, and you found it difficult to reconcile. How difficult is it to love the one who is your enemy? These enemies may be because they have different ways of life, interests or what is priority. But, no matter the reason for enemy status, there is a common element—you are human. And, God calls us to love others, even people we disagree with, or have wronged us in some way. Just reflect on this? Who is God calling you to love in this moment?

Throughout this season after Epiphany we have been challenged to share our gifts whatever God has blessed us with. We are the body of Christ as we gather as His church and we each have a role to play. We are called to love others and to follow. We are also blessed by God and are to offer others blessings because of God's love for us in Jesus. So how do you identify yourself as Christian? How do others know you love Jesus? Are you a Christian and do you believe? These might be difficult questions to ask oneself, but to profess our faith and to trust in Jesus will make a difference for our whole lives. Are you a CHRISTIAN?

PRAYER

Holy God we praise you for your Son Jesus Christ who calls us still to follow him. We are His hands and feet in these times and we are needed in the telling and retelling of Jesus' passion. Enable us to answer this call. Shine your light of love and hope upon us and renew our faith we pray. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.