

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Why are you here today? In this church? Or why would you be in any church? Do you consider yourself a Christian? Why? For that matter, why do or would you want to be a Christian? What does being a Christian mean to you? What does being a Christian look like to you? How about others? I think these questions are technically the foundation of Christian experience. After we wrestle with these for a while, then we can wrestle with even deeper questions. Is there a heaven? Is there a hell? Is there judgement? Did Jesus have to die? Why did Jesus choose to die? And then, getting even deeper, what does it mean to believe? Really believe? What is faith? Who is God?

Truth be told, I do wrestle with these questions all the time, and for as long as I can remember. Maybe even longer. Yet a part of me also says that questions like those are in some ways unimportant or, at least of little real consequence. I also know that something changed in me sitting in that truck cab in Vietnam that gave me faith, simple Abraham like faith. That does not mean that I do not have questions still. In fact, it does not even mean that I do not occasionally laugh at God' activities and promises in my life. Like starting seminary at 65 or even coming to Maui as an interim pastor at 72.

I also often talk about compiling a list of questions for God to answer when the time comes. Yet, the reality for me is that most likely one of three things is going to happen: a) I will have forgotten all those questions, or b) I will already know the answers to all those questions, or c) I will mostly likely have realized that those questions are no longer of concern or value.

Father Ken Saunders once said: "I'm not a Christian because I want the reward of heaven. I'm not a Christian because I'm running from hell. I'm a Christian because the character of Jesus Christ is so compelling that I want to spend my life chasing it, embodying it, and sharing it." Of course I have to ask, are those sentiments true for each of us? Well, only each of us and God know that answer.

Two random thoughts from this quote. First, is seeking heaven and avoiding hell something we do because of fear? I mean the Bible does often use phrasing about fearing God. You know that I also often talk about the multiple words possible when translating other languages into English. I recently found that Chad Bird has a whole article about "What does it mean to fear God?". It is an extensive expose on the Hebrew word "yārē" which we most often see translated as fear. He summarized the article with the following concluding sentences: "So, should we fear God? Yes, in the biblical sense of that term. We should yārē him, that is, love, trust, revere, honor, worship, and hope in him. Christianity is the faith of God-fearers." Do you, we fear God in that sense?

Second then, in the last sentence, those words chasing, embodying, and sharing bring immediately to my mind two concepts that I regularly share with you. First, what does it mean

for us to disciple? And second, what does it mean for us to be in relationship? Is it possible that those are essentially the same thing?

If we believe that - that is what our Christian life is really all about, then is there any real need for a new creation? Is there even a need for judgement? Is it possible that all that new creation and judgement language, mostly in the Old Testament but clearly some also in the New Testament, is simply symbolic? Are we currently focusing on new creation and judgement in our lives? How could or would our lives change if those were no longer our focus? Can we imagine what our focus would become? Maybe just caring for and loving others?

Greg Carey in his commentary on our Gospel reading from Matthew today said: “Healing and liberation certify the presence of the realm of heaven.” Do you realize that this is exactly what Jesus was saying when Jesus answered John the Baptist’s inquiry: “Are you the one who is coming, or should we wait for another?” The blind seeing, the lame walking, the lepers cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead living are all signs of healing and liberation. And in our reading Jesus commissions the disciples to perform the very works that Jesus does, calling them to advance beyond what Jesus did into new and emergent contexts. What are those new and emergent contexts for us? You see it does not matter whether we are with Jesus or commissioned by Jesus, the authentic proclamation of God’s realm is marked by healing and liberation. Are we doing that? Can we do that? Where and how are we to do it?

Mary Hinkle Shore in her commentary on our second reading from Romans said that it is interesting that Romans does not end with Chapter 4. In other words, justification is not a religious equivalent to the fairy tale ending – “They lived happily ever after.” In chapters 5 thru 8 of Romans, Paul then turns to answering the question, “Now what?”. As he does so, we see that in the world Christ has redeemed, sin does continue to exercise influence. She identified four key factors in this reading. First is that peace is possible and that justice and peace go hand in hand for those justified before God.

Second is that we have hope as well. A hope in sharing God’s glory. Third, we also will experience suffering but that it does not compare with the glory to come. Fourth, for the first time Paul mentions love in the letter to the Romans. Love will appear in Romans many more times. This first appearance, however, can be interpreted as either our love for God or God’s love for us.

In verse 5 of our reading from Exodus you can see God identifying the Israelites as God’s treasured possession of all the peoples. You should also be aware that this identification and covenant with Israel occurs prior to the giving of the law in Chapter 20.

Amidst all the joyful noise of the well-known Psalm 100, the last verse describes God’s faithfulness enduring from age to age. This, my friends, is an often repeated promise of God.

All of the following is from Chad Bird: “We want to help God with our forgiveness, especially when it comes to “big sins.” The little transgressions God can take care of, but the

big ones need a little extra effort on our part. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ excludes every hint of a do-it-yourself forgiveness. While we're out attempting a do-it-yourself atonement, the true atonement has already taken place at the cross. Every kind of wrongdoing, however minor or major we think it may be, has been made right in Jesus. And when Jesus was done, when atonement was complete, Jesus said so simply and so profoundly, "It is finished."
And Jesus meant every word. Your sin is finished. Your atonement is done. Jesus took all our sins away. And Jesus will never, ever give them back."

Hear then the good news:

Someone has said: "Christianity is not a message of morality that leads to forgiveness. It is a message of forgiveness that leads to morality."

Martin Luther said: "Christ came into the world to reconcile God with us and to draw us to God."

Martin Luther also said: "I must listen to the gospel. It tells me, not what I must do, but what Jesus Christ has done for me."

Jesus said: "It is finished."

Amen