

**“A TRUE CELEBRATION!”**  
***Psalm 100; Matthew 25:31-40***  
**Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor**

Sometimes on holidays some of us are guilty of just going through the motions. Whether it be Easter or Valentine’s Day or even Christmas, we just aren’t in the mood. Maybe life circumstances have hit you hard, and it’s difficult to get excited about the holidays this year. Perhaps health problems are looming large, coloring your view of the future to a significant degree. Perhaps the current economic picture has got you down. Just because a holiday is on the calendar doesn’t mean we are automatically upbeat and in a mood to celebrate.

I hope today is different. It’s thanksgiving time, and we all have much for which to be thankful, no matter what life has sent our way. Besides that, most of us have discovered, although we may need reminded from time to time, that gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. Thankfulness turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. Gratitude can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Someone has said that gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.(1)

Besides the blessings of our personal lives, we have a special reason to celebrate at Church of the Saviour. Eighty years ago this month, our sanctuary was opened for worship for the first time. For eighty years, this congregation has been worshiping God on Lee Road, and making a significant difference in this community and beyond. That in itself is certainly cause for celebration on this day.

A couple weeks ago two young women from our denominational headquarters in Nashville came to see me about a concern that is facing our church worldwide. They are meeting with the pastors of all the large churches concerning the pension fund for those in areas of the world outside the United States. They arrived early for their appointment and came in through the new entrance. They saw children in the library hearing a story, children playing in the Great Hall, and a meeting going on in the parlor as they walked down the hall. Then they arrived at the sanctuary, and they were simply overwhelmed with the beauty of the stone and the stained glass windows and the wood carvings, and the grandeur of it all. Although they’ve been traveling throughout the United States, they exclaimed, “We’ve never seen a United Methodist church quite like this one!” In a follow-up letter, they said, “We enjoyed visiting your church immensely. The sanctuary was breathtaking. Not only is the church beautiful, it is thriving. As was evident by the activity in the library when we walked in, the parents arriving to pick up their children, and the exciting fliers filling the bulletins boards, Church of the Saviour is a true community resource. I hope you’ll accept our congratulations for all you have accomplished.”

Yes, we have much for which to be thankful. I thank God for visionary leaders who

dreamed big, who built this magnificent edifice and who designed it in such a way that people would be inspired by its beauty to live better lives and to attempt great things for God. Yes, we have much for which to be thankful at Church of the Saviour.

Yet when we pause to celebrate our heritage, drawing inspiration and strength from the past, we must also look to the future. The primary focus of our faith is not yesterday, but tomorrow: on where we are headed as a society and as individuals.

We were privileged a few years ago to have Peter Storey, former bishop of the Methodist Church of South Africa, as our Myers Lecture speaker. In his recent book, *With God in the Crucible*, Peter Storey asks, “Who is the focus of the church? Who is the person we are concerned about? The person we exist to serve? For Jesus there was no question. In the Kingdom, the humble are lifted high and the most vulnerable have pride of place. That is why you cannot ask Jesus into your heart alone. He will ask, ‘Can I bring my friends?’ You will look at his friends, and they will consist of the poor and the marginalized and oppressed, and you will hesitate. But Jesus is clear: ‘Only if I can bring my friends.’”

In his provocative way, Storey continues, “Ask yourself which Christian has most powerfully impacted the imagination and conscience of the modern world: a satin-suited prosperous televangelist or a wizened old Albanian nun, who made herself the servant of the poorest of the poor, the dying people of Calcutta?”(2)

Today’s parable reminds us that **our eternal destiny depends on how we respond to human need**. It’s that simple. In like manner, Ezekiel makes it clear that those of us in leadership positions will be judged by God on the basis of one thing: how well we care for the weakest and the neediest among us. More and more we are being reminded that we live in a global village. Even though we are dealing with some difficult economic realities in our community, we need to see our problems through the eyes of the larger world community of which we are a part. I am haunted by the statistics which I read recently: “If the entire world’s population was 100 people, 50 would be malnourished, 70 would be unable to read, 80 would live in substandard housing, and 50% of the world’s wealth would be in the hands of six United States citizens.”(3)

Jesus had a lot to say about statistics such as these. He dares to remind us that the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoners — these are not poor people who are asking for our help, they are Christ himself asking for our love.

Some have pointed out that the criteria for who is welcomed into God’s eternal kingdom and who is not is based not on the right answers to doctrinal questions, but on our behavior. I would agree that the issue that separates the sheep from the goats is not giving the correct answer on a fine point of theology; it is our response to human need. However, our actions are almost always based on our fundamental convictions and beliefs. Someone has said, “What you do speaks so loudly, I can hardly hear what you are saying.” Stewardship experts tell us that if you want to see what a person believes, take a look at the ledger of his or her checkbook.

It was Martin Luther King, Jr., who once said, “Any religion which professes to be concerned with the souls of people, but is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that cripple them — such a religion is a dry-as-dust religion.”(4) The religion of the Bible is anything but a dry-as-dust religion. The Old Testament prophets were always concerned about the well-being not only of individuals, but of the entire society. Jesus was not content to minister only to the souls of persons, but provided food for the hungry,

healing for the sick and hope for the oppressed. In like manner, our spiritual ancestors, John and Charles Wesley, were concerned for the whole person. One of the distinctive emphases of early Methodism was the linking of head and heart. John Wesley not only preached about conversion and the new birth, and about going on to perfection, he also started sewing cooperatives for impoverished women, wrote and sold books to educate his converts, started schools and prison ministries and health clinics throughout Great Britain.

In the parable, those who had been serving in the soup kitchen, those who volunteered to help with the Interfaith Hospitality Network, those who worked on a Habitat House, were surprised that they had met Jesus in their service. “*When did we see you, Lord?*” they respond in shocked surprise. Jesus reminds them, and he reminds us, that whoever entertains the lowliest outsider, the stranger, the newcomer, the other, by direct extension also entertains Jesus himself.

The Anglican writer Ester de Waal, a specialist in Celtic spirituality and monastic hospitality, asks two simple but revealing questions of anyone who would aspire to be truly Christian: Do people see Christ in you? Do you see Christ in them? (5) There you have it. Do others see Christ in us? Do we see Christ in them? Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* tells of one morning when the volunteers who feed the hungry gathered early to get things ready for the long lines of homeless folks that stood outside waiting. Someone asked one of the workers to pray. This was her prayer: “*Lord, help me to see your face when you come through the line.*” (6)

Now you and I know that sometimes it is easier to see the face of Jesus than it is at other times. Sometimes, let’s just say, Christ is more recognizable. The face of a little child in front of the congregation in a choir robe is angelic indeed. That same face at the dinner table carrying on inappropriately or resisting bedtime or refusing to do chores may be something else! In Revelation 3:20 Jesus is depicted as standing at the door. Most of us have no problem opening the door to Christ. But when the person at the door is an undocumented immigrant, or an ex-convict, or a stranger, what do we do then? Do we ignore the knocking and hope the person will go away? Open the door and tell him or her to go away? Or open the door and ask the stranger to share our lives? Do people see Christ in us? Do we see Christ in them?

It is a fundamental Christian belief that God came to earth in Bethlehem’s manger, that God lived among us in the person of Jesus, that Christ continues to come to us in our daily lives, and that Christ will come again. Far away in the Swiss Alps the Abbott came into the monastery dining room one morning while the monks were eating breakfast. “*The Messiah is among us!*” he announced. The monks were taken aback. They truly believed that Christ would come again, but the announcement that he was in their midst gave them pause for reflection. Could it be that Brother Paul, Brother Simon, Brother Jack was the Messiah in disguise? Knowing that the Messiah was in their midst, the monks began to behave differently, and the quality of life in the monastery began to change. Not that the monks had been intentionally rude or disrespectful to one another, you understand. But now they treated each other with increasing dignity and respect, for after all, one of them was Jesus Christ himself. The whole character of their order began to change. Throughout Europe and eventually the whole world, they became known for their devotion to each other, their fervent worship of God, and their service to all humanity.

My friends, in spite of all the negative news we have heard this week, in spite of all that you may be dealing with, we have reason for **a true celebration** this day. I tell you, **The Messiah is among us!** Christ is in our midst.

*Prayer:* Lord, when we hear the words of this parable, we are haunted by the words, “*When did we see you, Lord?*” Help us to see you as we look at each other. We pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

Notes:

1. *Awaken. The Art of Imaginative Preaching.* Pentecost, 2008., p. 52.
2. Storey, Peter. *With God in the Crucible.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 154.
3. *Pulpit Resource.* Vol. 36. No. 4., p. 36.
4. King, Jrs., Martin Luther. Quoted in the *Christian Century.* Vol. 125, no.23., p. 20.
5. Sweet, Leonard. *The Gospel According to Starbucks.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, pp. 48-59.
6. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource.* Vol. 36. No. 4., p. 36.