

“Christ before Christianity” based on Philippians 3:2-16, Matthew 21:33-46

Delivered on October 4, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Last week, I talked with you a little about the difference between Brand Jesus and a genuine faith in God that rests on truly saying, ‘yes,’ to Jesus in our lives. Today’s gospel reading picks up where we left off last week. Jesus is still talking to the Sadducees, the same temple priests and elders.

These are the leaders who see their faithful role in serving the One True God as using any means they have, including deals with Rome, to protect their freedom to worship God. Free not only to worship, but free to gather and sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem. These are the religious leaders doing what they believe is best to serve God, but in doing so, Jesus says that they have lost sight of what really matters to God. Oddly, they have made one thing – temple worship – more important than God.

Here we are, seven months into a pandemic, worshiping online only, and I can say I sympathize with the Sadducees perhaps more now than ever. It’s hard. We haven’t been able to worship as we are used to doing for seven months.

In today’s scripture, we see that the crowd has grown now to include some Pharisees, and as I said last week, these were the religious leaders who were trying to adapt. These religious leaders emphasized scripture over the temple worship. They wanted to interpret and apply the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms and wisdom writings, all collected from their ancestors and kept through the exile. They wanted to keep these scriptures at the center of their faith in God, by doing their best to keep every command of God, in a rapidly changing world, that made it harder and harder to keep those commands.

Like the Sadducees, I can relate to the Pharisees more now than ever as well. It is really hard to keep the teachings we find in scripture when we are living in our modern day. The past 20 to 40 years have been a time of unparalleled change in our culture, and it is hard to keep up, hard to maintain our Christian identity, and hard to follow our moral compass in an ever increasingly hedonistic world.

The pressures of the world on the people of God in the first century, were not very different from the pressures we face today. We have the same temptations that they faced in their day, as we look to preserve our identity as Christians. We risk making the same mistakes that they did, losing sight of the God we worship.

Jesus presents for the Sadducees and Pharisees a parable that is like an allegory, in that you can see where the story lines up with the story of God and Israel. Jesus even mirrors the language of the Prophet Isaiah, which we used in the prayer of confession, by describing the vineyard as having a wine press and watchtower, which were things that showed a land owner’s efforts to make the vineyard successful.

The vineyard represents for us the Kingdom of God, and the tenants are the leadership of Israel. The produce is a people faithful to the One True God and they are the grapes by which a fine

wine is then made, the wine of righteousness and justice. But from Isaiah, we know that the vineyard has produced sour grapes of bloodshed, suffering and cries.

Jesus here is not taking the Kingdom away from the people of Israel but he is blaming the leadership for holding back the harvest of the faithful and keeping the Kingdom from them. He is talking to those who killed the prophets that were sent to bring those people back to God, even killing the Son of the landowner, which is a reference to Jesus, who is predicting his own death in this parable.

Notice, these same leaders say that what would be just, would be for the owner to come and replace them, but still they do what the tenants did and respond by plotting Jesus's death. The tenants in the parable want to murder the Son and heir in order to keep the inheritance. This is the temptation of power, of control, of feeling like you're in charge of God's Kingdom. They want the loyalty of the people, whom they are afraid would turn on them if they arrested Jesus right there, and they don't want to give those people and that loyalty to God.

We see this in the church today, so don't be lulled into thinking this text is old news, as if the parable was about transferring the Kingdom of God from Jews to Gentiles. Far be it. This is a warning to us all today, especially leadership in churches, and anyone who steps up and claims to be able to decide who is in and who is out, who belongs to the Kingdom of God and who does not—who is truly a Christian and who is not.

Even today, we are tempted to reject the cornerstone – Jesus – from our churches, from the definition of what it means to be Christian falling too often far outside the orthodoxy of our church, usually siding on some sort of religious pride. But as we learn from the Apostle Paul, religious pride is meaningless before God.

Paul's warning is very similar to Jesus's and again it is not an old issue. Just because Paul makes reference to the circumcision, it's easy for us to assume this is a Jew versus Gentile thing. But it is not. Remember that the church in Philippi was in a Gentile city. He is not trying to convert Jews to Christianity, as Paul very much maintained his Jewish identity, but found it completed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is warning Gentiles to stay focused.

Paul even lauds his own credentials as man born and raised in the traditions of Israel. He says that if anyone has reason to be confident in the flesh, in their works, it's him. Paul really was a superstar. He was not just some guy who got picked up and became a Jesus follower. He was a student of Gamaliel, who was the top Rabbi of that day. Imagine him as a PhD student at an Ivy League School or Oxford or Cambridge, he was the top of the top.

He was not just any practitioner of faith in the One God of Israel, of Judaism. He was in fact from birth circumcised on that eighth day, the right day to be circumcised. He was an Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin, which with Judah, was not a lost tribe, but made up the Kingdom of Judah. He was a Hebrew born of Hebrews. As he said, to the Law, he was a Pharisee, who studied under Gamaliel. As to his zeal for God, well, there was none more zealous in protecting Jewish identity and faith in God. He was even a persecutor of the church when he thought the church was blaspheming God. As to righteousness under the law as interpreted by the Pharisees, he was blameless.

But all of that, he regarded as rubbish. This word rubbish is a funny word that one Pastor I listened to accurately said, it's the closest thing to a curse word in the New Testament. It is waste thrown to a dog, or more accurately, the excrement of a dog. That's how he regards all of his credentials as a believer. We have in our church culture today, three strains of thought that get over emphasized and draw us away from the gospel.

One says Jesus is a teacher and we are called to follow the teachings of Jesus as best we can. It doesn't so much matter whether Jesus is One with God or not, as long as we follow those teachings as best we can. Of course, these teachings can be selectively followed, or interpreted favorably in a very modern light overemphasizing love as infinitely permissive. There is truth here, but it misses the full picture.

Another says that God is eternally angry up in heaven who only gives us a break because there is this guy Jesus who God tortures and kills. Jesus is our get out of jail free card, because He was subservient enough to have satiated God's anger, so that we can count ourselves as ready for heaven to share in imposing our anger against all the sins we see in other people in the world. Again, there is some truth from which this picture is drawn, but it is a misrepresentation that often causes people to lose sight of the full picture.

And then there is a third, that says it all comes down to our faith. That our faith saves us and if we just have enough faith then anything we want will be ours. Jesus showed us what faith in God can do and if we have enough faith then we will find blessings, wealth and health, and more things will go good for you. This also takes a truth and distorts it into something that is not what the gospel says.

Friends, Paul is seeing these kinds of tendencies even in the early church, in a church that he counts as wonderful in Philippi. This letter is a thank you letter, appreciating the church for its faith in Jesus and its support of Paul in his ministries. But he is seeing them already reverting back to the idea that we earn our salvation from God. It is a belief that we saw in the pagans building pyramids to reach up into the heavens to approach God, when the good news is that God and God's Kingdom came down to us, when God shared in our humanity in Jesus.

There is an interesting part in this text where Paul says, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith, which is generally how most translations will render this. But the Greek can also be translated equally correctly as saying, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through the faithfulness of Christ, the righteousness of God based on faith.

I like that second one better because I feel like it fits with the high Christology, or emphasis of Christ's divinity like we saw in Philippians 2, where God humbled God's self to become a human like us, in order that we would then be able to share in the life of God.

What Paul wrote here in Chapter 3 is a parallel to what we read last week in our in-person service in the cemetery. Where God's humility is stressed at the start of the hymn in Chapter 2, Paul brags of his greatness. Where the cross is the greatness of God and Jesus in Chapter 2, in Chapter 3 the cross brings the humility to Paul. Where God's faithfulness to us lifts us up, Paul

shows how his height in this world is nothing, except when lifted up by God. Jesus is the righteousness of God and the faithfulness of Jesus is our righteousness.

This is something we have to remember. It is not our works that earn us anything. It's not what we do that earns God's love. It's not how you vote. It's not how you are on social media. It's not the decorations you put in your home. None of those trappings of brand Christianity, even if they may be good things, are what make us Christians. Christ must go before all of those things. Paul made this point early in the church. Jesus made this point before He died. He is the cornerstone on which the church is to be built. It is not built on anything we say it is or should be, the church we make in our own image, or the god we make in our own image.

No, God is the God who shared in our humanity, our image to redeem us, to be born a lowly human, live as we live, die for us and rise again for us, so that we might share in God's life, abundant and eternal, filling us by the Holy Spirit pouring love into our hearts. That love is to pour out toward others so that all will know who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us.

Our behavior is to be a response and our behavior should be like Christ's, humbling ourselves, getting down from our high places and seeing people in our world where they are. It means seeing ourselves as broken, along with all who are broken. It means having that humility and gentleness, with patience, to bear with one another in love. And on this World Communion Sunday especially, remember that we are one faith, with one Lord, one Spirit, and one God and Father of all, who calls us by our one baptism to be one church.

That's us. That should be our identity in Christ alone. From this identity in Christ should follow our Christianity. Remember always first, that Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

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words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom

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Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***

(*Matthew* 21:33-46 NRSV) "***Listen*** to another parable. There was a ***landowner*** who ***planted*** a vineyard, ***put a fence around*** it, ***dug a wine press*** in it, and ***built a watchtower***. ***Then*** he ***leased*** it to tenants and ***went to another country***. When the ***harvest*** time ***had*** come, he ***sent*** his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ***But*** the tenants seized his ***slaves*** and ***beat*** one, ***killed*** another, and ***stoned*** another. ***Again*** he sent other slaves, ***more*** than the ***first***; and they ***treated*** them in the ***same*** way. ***Finally*** he sent his ***son*** to them, ***saying***, "They will ***respect my*** son.' But when the ***tenants saw*** the son, they ***said to themselves***, '***This*** is the ***heir***; come, ***let*** us kill ***him*** and ***get*** his ***inheritance***.'" So they ***seized*** him, ***threw*** him out of the ***vineyard***, and killed him. ***Now when*** the owner ***of*** the vineyard ***comes***, ***what*** will he do to ***those*** tenants?" ***They*** said to him, "He will put those ***wretches*** to a ***miserable death***, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who ***will*** give him the produce at the harvest ***time***." ***Jesus*** said to them, "***Have*** you ***never read*** in the ***scriptures***: 'The stone that the ***builders rejected has become*** the ***cornerstone***; this ***was*** the ***Lord's doing***, and it is ***amazing*** in ***our eyes***'? ***Therefore I tell you***, the ***kingdom of God*** will be ***taken away from*** you and ***given*** to a ***people*** that ***produces*** the ***fruits*** of the kingdom. The one who ***falls*** on this stone will be ***broken to pieces***; and it will ***crush anyone*** on ***whom*** it falls." When the ***chief priests*** and the ***Pharisees heard*** his ***parables***, they ***realized*** that he was ***speaking*** about them. They ***wanted to arrest*** him, but they ***feared the crowds***, ***because*** they ***regarded*** him as a ***prophet***."