

TO BE AND TO BELIEVE

Sermon for Pentecost 7C—Lk 10:1-11, 16-20

LPC, 7/7/13

People have some pretty strange ideas about Christianity. This has perhaps always been the case, but in this so-called “post-Christian” age, when there are more people who have never spent more than a few hours in a church (and that for a wedding or a funeral), misconceptions abound as never before.

For example, some non-Christians assume that Christians are ideologues who walk in lockstep with each other and aren’t allowed to have fun. Clearly, people who think this way don’t know any Episcopalians.

Another widely-held assumption is that the church has money to hand out to anyone who asks for it. Anybody who works in a church office can tell you that many of the phone calls that come in are from people who want money. A few applicants for cash have been known to become touchy when money is not forthcoming. I’m not the only one who has heard, “And you call yourself a Christian!” from one of these people. Clearly, to many, a Christian is someone who gives away money. Never mind that Jesus himself was never known to give money to anyone but the taxman.

Some misconceptions are even more sobering. When Presiding Bishop Kathryn Jefferts-Schori visited West Virginia a few years ago, she cited a survey done of unchurched college students who were asked to describe Christians. Responses varied, but the trait most agreed upon was that Christians are people who hate gays.

I suppose that if we want to do anything to counteract the false assumptions that non-Christians have about what Christians are, we Christians first have to decide what Christians are. Or at least: who we are as Christians. Then we have to act as if we believe it.

A logical place to start in deciding what Christians are is the Creed. Christians believe this Creed. But do we live the Creed? We say we believe in a Father God who created heaven and earth. What might it mean to believe that? A person who believes in a Father God who created heaven and earth might be expected to behave in a way that looks upon the earth as a divine creation, to be respected. The earth was given us for our sustenance and our home, and may be used as such, but with gratitude and generosity, not greed.

If we believe in heaven as well as earth, what does that mean? That we live in a hopeful way which does not despair of earthly disappointments, knowing that this life is not all there is. We live according to values that may not be achievable in this life, but which are real, and will at some point reach fruition.

If we believe in Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, what does that mean? That we live as if the kingdom of heaven is near, that the created world is good, and that

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we really believe that divine love and human redemption are truly accessible to us and to all people.

If we believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, what does that mean? That we live in community, that we forgive and live forgiven, free, and fearless. That we hope, and that we model hope to the hopeless.

So, if we look to no other source than to the Creed, of what we say we believe every week, Christians stand for community, forgiveness, freedom, fearlessness and hope. If this community, this forgiveness, this freedom and fearlessness and hope, is not what non-Christians associate with Christianity, who is responsible?

No wonder Jesus says that “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.”

My friends, the world so badly needs community, forgiveness, freedom, fearlessness and hope. These are the things Christianity can offer. If we have it, and the world needs it, why are we getting so little respect? Could it be that we don't behave as if we have it? If we don't behave as if we have it, why should anyone believe we have it?

When Jesus sends out the seventy to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God, he sends them out without provisions for a reason. They already have what they need. They have the kingdom of God. They don't need more money, or more people, or a comprehensive plan, or an advanced degree, or even an entrepreneurial personality. All they have to do is believe in what they already have and act like it.

When the seventy really behave as if they believe what they say they believe, miracles happen, and they are elated. Jesus warns them not to take the credit. It is God who has done these things. But with God in control, there is nothing to fear. Jesus is clear about this: “Nothing will hurt you.”

Nothing will hurt you.

All the same, don't go treading on snakes and scorpions, please. That's just stupid. But isn't it also stupid to say you believe in something wonderful and then act if it's not true?

We are the church. We are the Body of Christ. Through Christ, we have community, we have forgiveness, we have freedom. Through Christ, we fear nothing. Through Christ, we have hope.

In the end, the labor to which we are called is not exactly labor. It's not achievement through effort, great or small. The labor to which we are called is simply to be what we believe.