

“Does Our Christianity Make Any Difference?”

a sermon by

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Text: “And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (Matthew 5:47).

In this week’s *New York Times*, Nicholas Kristof raises an important question about the terrible killing that is taking place in Dafur in the Sudan of Africa. Two years ago President Bush referred to the events in Dafur as the “first genocide of the Twenty First Century.” Yet, as Kristof points out, it isn’t just the President that has been silent on the terrible atrocities that have taken place there, the same is true of the mainstream media as well. According to the Tyndall Report, ABC News has had a total of 18 minutes of the Darfur genocide in its nightly newscast over the past year--and that turns out to be a credit to Peter Jennings. NBC had only 5 minutes of coverage all last year, and CBS only 3 minutes of reporting, which amounts to about a minute of coverage for every 100,000 deaths. In contrast, Martha Stewart received 130 minutes of coverage by the three networks.

There is something very troubling about a culture that seems so preoccupied with celebrity weddings and so oblivious to the terrible death and destruction that is threatening an entire continent.

I.

One of the most compelling and challenging portions of Scripture is found in Jesus' teaching of the "Sermon on the Mount," which is found in Matthew 5-7. Christians have always struggled with this portion of Scripture. It presents a "new righteousness," which goes far beyond anything else in the Old or New Testament. George Buttrick once told the story of a man who came up to him once and said, "I am not much of a Christian. I just try to live by the Sermon on the Mount." Buttrick noted that anyone who would make a statement like that did not know much about Christianity or the Sermon on the Mount.

Anyone who takes these three chapters in Matthew's gospel seriously is almost automatically driven to despair. They present an "impossible ethic." In this sermon Jesus takes the ethic of the Old Testament and lifts it to a new dimension. "You have heard it said of old," observed Jesus, "You shall not murder," but I say to you 'Do not be angry with a brother or sister.'" And again, "You have heard it said, 'Do not commit adultery,' but I say that a person who looks at another in lust has committed adultery.'" And then there is this one: "You have heard it said of old, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'"

Someone once called Jesus "the great disturber" and there is nowhere this is more obvious than in the Sermon on the Mount. No wonder Karl Marx called Christianity the "opiate of the people" or that Friedrich Nietzsche dismissed it as a "religion for the weak." And yet, in spite of all the efforts to rationalize the Sermon on the Mount, it stands before us as the most magnificent teaching in the New Testament and it is not inconsistent with the ministry of Jesus. He did turn the other cheek. He prayed on the cross for those who placed him there.

That is what haunts me about this passage of Scripture. It is about discipleship. Jesus says to us that if we only are nice to those who are nice to us, if we only love those who love us, if we only do what others around us do, then does our Christianity really make any difference? So what is it that sets us apart? What is it that separates light from darkness, sheep from goat, the narrow way from the wide way? That is the question.

II.

One of the distinguishing aspects Jesus' ethic is the emphasis on the "lost." In a series of parables he spoke about a "lost coin," a "lost sheep," and a "lost son." Moreover, he demonstrated in his own life a concern for the ones he called "the least of these." He reached out to tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes--people who were outside the law. One of the great contributions of Jesus was his insistence that every person was a "child of God" and that every human life has worth.

Some years ago I read with a great deal of interest Norman MacLean's wonderful little book *A River Runs Through It*, which was later made into a movie by Robert Redford. I was drawn to the book for a number of reasons. It was a story about a Presbyterian minister and his two sons. I was also drawn to it, because I have a great love for fly-fishing and I was fascinated

by MacLean's observation that preaching the gospel was very much like fly-fishing. Both, he observes, are repetitive activities, both entail elements of art, beauty, patience and mystery. Both, I might add, can sometimes leave you "hung up" in the bushes.

Concerning his father, Norman MacLean remembers, "My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things--trout as well as eternal salvation--come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy."

But there was something else that drew me to this powerful story. It is, at heart, a story about a father and two sons. The older son, who is the author of the book, is very proper, makes all A's in school, lands a job in a university, and can be a bit dull. The younger son, a gifted fisherman, who is played in the movie by a very young Brad Pitt, is brilliant, charismatic, and a bit on the wild side. The younger son, who is a compulsive gambler, is finally killed, when he cannot pay his gambling debts. In his final sermon, the father speaks these poignant words: "Each one of us will at one time in our lives will look upon a loved one in need and ask the same question. We are willing to help, Lord--but what, if anything, is needed? Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give, or more often than not the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is with those we live with and know who elude us. But we can still love them completely, without complete understanding."

There is nothing more essential to the cost of discipleship than sharing with Jesus a love and compassion of the lost.

III.

Then, too, if our Christianity is going to make any difference, we are going to have to make a more significant impact on our community and nation. Sometimes we speak of Christianity in very general terms. We speak of the love of God for all people, and the redeeming power of God's grace.

But our Christianity needs be more than that. It needs to bring a person to particular conclusions. As a Christian, I am against all forms of totalitarianism and oppression and all governments that oppress and torture people.

As a Christian, I am against discrimination against people because of their gender, race, or sexual orientation.

As a Christian, I am against all forms of racial discrimination that treat any person as anything else than a child of God, created in the image of God.

As a Christian, I must carry on my conscience the heavy burden of the great inequity of wealth in this country that has created a permanent underclass.

During the last several weeks I watched with great interest the performance of Lance Armstrong in winning his seventh consecutive victory in the tour de France. Tom Friedman,

writing in the *New York Times*, observed that one of the things he admired about Lance Armstrong was the strategic focus he brought to his work, from the prerace training to the meticulous way he and his team plot out every leg of the race.

This ability to meld strength and strategy--to plan thoughtfully ahead and to sacrifice today for some big gain tomorrow--these seem like fading virtues in American life. So today we have the new C.E.O. of Morgan Stanley initially demanding a contract that his total pay for the two years would be no less than the average pay package received by the C.E.O.'s at Goldman Sachs, Merrill Lynch, Lehman Brothers, and Bear Stearns. That is quite a twist. Now we have a business executive demanding that he be paid not on the basis of the performance of his company, but on the average of his four main rivals.

The same is true in our national life. We don't have a coherent energy plan that will bring down the price of crude oil. Instead we build and drive the gas guzzlers that are feeding the war on terror. We don't have the national leadership that is willing to go beyond saying that we will provide adequate troops for our generals in Iraq to asking the question, "What do you need to win?" Because it is clear that we are not winning the war in Iraq because we have never made Iraq a secure place where normal policies could emerge.

Jesus commanded his disciples that they were to be the "light of the world," that is they were supposed to be a source of illumination in the great darkness of human events. They were to be "salt" in the sense of bring preservation, taste, and a distinct flavor to the world around us.

IV.

The key, of course, to the kind of Christianity that makes a difference is the rediscovery of Jesus Christ and his way of life. For while the principles of the Sermon on the Mount run quite deep, they can be summarized quite readily.

In dealing with us Jesus focuses on the inner heart of a person because he understood that it is the source of both good and evil. The commandment is not only that we refrain from murder, but also that we not hate; that we not only refrain from adultery, but that we exhibit respect for ourselves and others; not only that we refrain from oaths, but that our word is as good as our bond; that good works are not a prelude to seeking righteousness, but flow from the righteousness that God has given us in Christ

In dealing with others Jesus is equally clear. He demands that we treat each other with love, fairness, and justice. In the same fashion that God sends the rain on the just and the unjust, so we are called to show goodwill to those who are grateful as well as to those who are not, to those who are friendly as to those who are hostile.

In dealing with God, Jesus asks of us nothing more than that our religion not be a matter of praying in public places in order to be seen by others but by a sense of inward fellowship with the one who is both our creator and redeemer, so that seeking his will upon earth, we will find tranquility in lesser matters.

Through the centuries the church has discovered those individuals who have shown us something of the light of Christ. So often in the Protestant Church we celebrate the great Reformers of the Sixteenth Century: Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli. But in truth there were those remarkable individuals who in many ways paved the way for the reforms that were so necessary for the church. There were people like John Huss, John Wyclif who in many ways anticipated the Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century in protesting the corruption of the medieval church, in the exaltation of the Bible, and in attempting to reform the church.

Early this summer when I visited Florence, Italy, I was drawn to the Piazza della Signoria, not far from the great cathedral or Duomo in the center of the center. There is a marker on the ground that denotes the place where the fiery reformer Savonarola died. Now Savonarola has never enjoyed a "good press." He was a fiery Dominican who for a short while ruled Florence after he had dispelled the Medici family. During the Carnival season in 1496 he called for a "Bonfire of the Vanities" in which people brought masks, indecent books, and art works and burned them in fire. Later the people turned on him and in April of 1498 he was tortured, hanged, and burned by the city government.

Now all of these individuals were eccentric in many ways. But every one had been touched in a real way by the spirit of Christ. And I think we could use a little of this today in the face of conventional Christianity that doesn't seem to have much impact on anyone.

Christ is Christianity--all of Christianity that matters much. To know him, to be his disciples, to take him seriously, to practice his way of life is the hope of the church. That is also the hope of civilization. It is also what we are called to be: members of a transformed ban of women and men that the world cannot tame.