

June 11, 2017

Sermon: *Anybody Seen the Real Church?*

Pastor Clay Oglesbee

Texts: Colossians 3:1-17, Galatians 5:22-26

My family is here today, so I must tell this story. Some years ago, while I was still preparing to become a pastor, I met an older woman, a distant relative of my wife's family, at a funeral reception in a tiny, little, non-denominational church near the Guthrie township hall, Minnesota. *You know the place?* I supposed there might be 300 people living in the area. We talked for a bit, and in the course of our conversation, I learned that she had joined her particular church *after leaving* the local Methodist church. She told me, leaning in very close—and very confidentially and very intensely, *“You know, those Methodists are not real Christians!” //*

Now, if John Wesley had been there, he probably would have said to the woman, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion.... (Let us) forward one another in love and good works.”

I didn't say anything like that. I looked at her very solemnly, and I did not tell her that I was a Methodist. I did not even disagree with her about her point of view. I wanted to keep her good opinion of me.

I hope I was gracious. I noticed her question: *where is the real, the true, the transcendent,* and Wesley would

have given her a preliminary answer: What you seek is not in correct opinions and quarrels about the things, but in mutual love and encouragement. Somehow I understood, in spite of myself, that the woman represented the human quest to find and to become part of *the real thing, the real God, the real faith, the real hope, the real love, the real truth of things, and the real people of God—and to settle for nothing less!*

Human beings are continually, and in all that matters about their lives, on a quest for what is real, right, true, valid, actual and authentic. The universality and historicity of the quest is reflected in many cultures, times and places. Gautama Buddha said over 2500 years ago, *“Those who have failed to work toward the truth have missed the purpose of living.”* Socrates wrote in 400 BC, *“It is not living, but living rightly that matters.”* The Apostle Paul instructs the church in Philippi, *“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”* C.J. Jung, one of the key psycho-analysts of the 20th century, said the task of human beings is “to be fully conscious of one’s existence...”, what lies within the soul, what occurs in the world, and what emerges from the future.

Let us admit together that, though we seek, we have a terribly difficult time finding. What are the suitable ways to discover what that truth is? I don’t just mean

the challenges of identifying untruths, lies and deliberate falsehoods in today's political discourse. I mean, how are we to find our best selves, our transcendent selves, in a world filled with things that *falsely claim* to be true, honorable, and commendable, or even ultimate and divine—when they are not.

For example, do you know which advertising campaign is said to be the most popular one ever run? It surfaced during "*the turgid summer of 1971, (and) through the terrible autumn of 1972, (as) TV newscasts...seemed unrelenting: millions marching to stop the war in Viet Nam, prisoners attacked at Attica, the Watergate scandal and the Pentagon Papers, the Manson and Serpico and My Lai trials, guns in Munich, bombs in D.C., and troops in Derry, Ireland... Pain and hatred and misery.*

And the creative and entrepreneurial response to all that national and planetary pain was---a commercial: *The spot begins with a blonde woman, eyes clear blue, lip-syncing... "I'd like to buy the world a home, and furnish it with love...grow apple trees, and honeybees, and snow-white turtledoves..."*

The camera pans across rows of young singers, smiling with the rising sun—Spanish, Swedish, Nigerian, Nepalese, dressed in a dashiki, a kimono, a dirndl, a Nehru, a turtleneck.

Together they lip-sync, "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony." Each holds a green glass hobble skirt bottle in their right hand, one branded in English script,

the next in Arabic, another in Thai. "I'd like to buy the world a Coke," they sing, "and keep it company." The camera pulls up to an aerial view, revealing 200 singers aligned on a green hillside like an open fan, a youth chorus of the world.

"It's the real thing—Coke is," they sing in unison, "what the world wants today. Is the real thing"...Buying a Coke, the ad said, was like buying the world shelter and peace. It was to the real thing. The thing we were all, all over the world, seeking, questing and yearning for...

Was it? Was it what we sought? (No). The truth is that even when the commercial was made, there were a thousand Italian orphan kids waiting all day in hot buses to be part of the commercial. When the production team finally let them off the buses, they revolted at the way they had been treated...rocked and tipped over buses and trucks at the set, and then threw Coke bottles at the crews and a filming helicopter. *That part did not make the commercial.*

Hundreds of millions, billions, really, of people in our nation and throughout the world—whether nominally Christians or something else-- are hungering, thirsting and asking for this mysterious, transcendent *something* that is *not* a cold Coca-Cola. And they ask the question with some of the outrage and confusion of the Italian orphans... in a variety of ways, sometimes explicitly and sometimes unconsciously. They ask for it by way of disappointment, or skepticism, or mistrust. Even by

way of rage, screaming and brutality and flight. They ask for it by way of religious cults and political movements . They ask for it by way of the private and secure solace of the television, focus on their families alone, cable, texting, the internet, and on and on.

They ask for, they and we all beg for, the real thing, the true and purposeful and authentic life. That is what Jesus offers us, an answer we can test among all the other answers to the question about what is real and worthy of our commitments. The Real Thing is God and community. The real thing is faith, hope, love and insight.

To say this another way, using the images from today's readings in Colossians and in Galatians: all humankind is universally longing to "clothe themselves with the new self" and to be freed from the things which imprison their best selves. We cannot bear to be only our old self, our worldly and self-focused lives. We have a deep intuition that we were created and intended for something greater, something that gleams with beauty, with love, and with compassion. The old self is wearied by the corruptions our economic, political and social structures have fallen into. The possibility and offer in Christ is to find life in God-Spirit as a *new self, a new being*---Well, *that would be* the real thing!

These Scripture readings today instruct us how best to "live Christ" as *real* human beings participating in *real*

communities and *real* churches which are made up of imperfect human beings, not the flawless ones in commercials. *The Bible texts* offer spiritual guidance for coping with the challenging reality that human beings, God's own children and the world we make, don't always play well together, and don't always go the right, true and good together...but we are *meant for* spiritual wholeness, kindness and beauty. We sense it in ourselves.

*I will pour out my spirit on **all humankind**.
Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your
old men shall dream dreams and your young
men shall see visions. Even on my servants will I
pour out my spirit in those days (Joel 3:1-2).*

The real church does not need to be found somewhere else, or *in something* else! It doesn't need to be purchased or leased. It doesn't need to be sipped from a Coke bottle. The real church actually can happen *right where we stand*—What makes it real is not technicolor staging, blonde girls and boys, catchy lyrics and good choreography, but the *power and mercy of God given to us through the living presence and indwelling Spirit of Jesus Christ*. That is pretty real.