

Twenty-First Sunday Ordinary Time Year A- Deacon Mike Walsh August 2011

What does it take to be a member of Christ's church?

I have shared with you that if I could only take one of the four gospels with me to a desert island it would be Matthew.

If I had one question for the author of this gospel it might well surround this week's text. I would like him to clarify in just a bit more detail what he meant when he quotes Jesus as saying:

"You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church...."

I find this interesting because the other three gospels, including John, have this story, often called "Peter's confession of Christ" but only Mathew has the part about Peter being the rock.

These few lines of scripture have lead to pages of theology, doctrine, dogmas and along with it disagreements and fractures in the followers of the Christ.

In recent years it seems that we are on a rocket ride in the west. We seem to be determined to become a society without church- some argue we have entered the post-Christian secular world where there will soon be no mention of God at all.

On my website this week I posted a talk given by Oblate priest Fr. Ron Rolheiser. I encourage you to visit it and take the 45 minutes required to listen to Fr. Rolheiser discuss his topic- Middle Age Catholics- Missing in Action?

He offers a top 10 list ala David Lettermen on why people are no longer going to church. He wisely offers 5 reasons right wing Catholics offer for the decline and contrasts that with the top 5 offered by liberals within the church.

Conservatives often lament the post Vatican II era and blame the drop of church attendance on the loss of fear in God and lack of reverence in our celebrations.

Liberals lay the blame squarely at the feet of the church hierarchy who they claim are out of touch and are responsible for the scandals that have rocked the church over the past 20 years.

I would like to focus our time together today not on the reasons why church attendance is falling. Fr. Rolheiser does a wonderful job in framing this debate.

What I would like to consider is this:

What are the "non-negotiables", to borrow a phrase from Fr. Richard Rohr, for being a follower of Jesus Christ based on the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament?

I am going to suggest four teachings that are core for us to follow if we are to be members of the church. There are of course many more teachings and traditions but I would like to use our time to focus on four.

Faith that we are the beloved of God

Theologians and scholars offer many different perspectives on why Jesus became a man and walked amongst us. As I read the New Testament accounts of Christ's ministry it is evident to me that one of the non-negotiables, perhaps the most important one, is that Jesus wanted us to know, trust and believe with all of our hearts that we are all children of a loving God.

We are the beloved- we are brothers and sisters of Christ and our Father is a loving God the Jesus wants us to know as ABBA.

"God so loved the world that he sent us his only Son." St. Paul goes to great lengths to tell us that we are justified by faith- there is nothing we can do that will ever cause God- Jesus to turn his back on us.

Once we accept that we are unconditionally loved by God this should free us to live a Christian life. But beware the remaining non-negotiable are likely more difficult than anything the 10 commandments or the Catechism holds out as rules, doctrines or dogmas.

Follow Christ's teachings on Love:

- **Love of God-** Jesus reminds us that the greatest commandment remains to love our God with all of our heart. Accepting that our God is ABBA- the loving father makes this "commandment" easier to follow.
- **Love of Self-** this is clearly tied in with our belief- our faith- that we are the beloved of God. If God finds us worthy of unconditional love then we must find ourselves worthy of being loved.
- **Love of neighbor-** More on this in the last point but Jesus is quite clear that we must look beyond our family to find the ones we are called to serve in love.
- **Love of our enemies-** I read recently that "*God chooses our neighbors but we choose our enemies*". I challenge anyone to suggest that any of the 10 commandments is more difficult to keep than this non-negotiable. We are a church, a group of disciples that is challenged by Christ to live lives of non-violence and to willingly turn our cheek to those who are out to destroy us.

Forgiveness

Today as part of our celebration we will pray the words that Jesus taught us and in those words we ask God to forgive us in equal measure to the forgiveness we offer to those who have trespassed against us.

One preacher I like asserts that well over half the wisdom teachings of Jesus and his signs deal with the core Christian action of forgiveness. Jesus tells us at one point that we should not even attempt prayer if we are holding a grudge against someone.

Practice Inclusion vs. Exclusion

The potential landmine if there is one in this discussion. Much of the time of the leaders of organized religions, Christian denominations, seems to be spent talking and writing about what defines the group. We seem to spend a lot of time and passion, from the right and the left on the rules for entry.

These may be valid and in the few words I have left it is not a debate I can entertain.

Based on the scripture it is clear that Jesus Christ was a person of inclusion. He invited sinners and tax collectors to break bread with him. He offers the parable of the great feast where the king tells his servants to go into the streets and invite everyone to the table.

As followers of the Christ we are called to be brothers and sisters to everyone we come into contact with.

What does this mean? Fr. Rolheiser in his talk suggests that “no one gets into heaven without a reference letter from the poor.” Matthew 25- read it- there seems to be no way around it.

To be members of the Church of Jesus is a great calling. For those who think membership is easy they are actually correct. But to live as a faith filled disciple, fully embracing Jesus non-negotiable teachings- well that is a different story.