

"Deeds or Creeds?"

Acts 6:1-7

May 22, 2011

5th Sunday Of Easter

There used to be a time (well within my lifetime) when parents would be proud to announce that their son had decided to go “into the ministry”. Although it wasn’t explicitly stated, everyone knew what that meant. The young man was going to study to become a pastor. Parents and others were happy because he was going off to “serve the Lord.” But what exactly does that phrase – “serve the Lord” – mean? How do you serve the Lord? What is the ministry of the church? There has been much confusion about this throughout the ages.

Some people would say that the ministry of the Church is to preach the Gospel in order to save souls from death and hell. Much energy, attention, and resources are devoted to worship and Bible Study within a congregation. When we do talk about outreach into the community, it’s usually for evangelism and reaching out with the Gospel. Not much time or resources are devoted to caring for people’s physical needs. Such needs are deemed to be less important because they are not “spiritual”. We think they can be left to social service organizations who can handle them much better than we can.

There was a reaction to this “spiritualization” of the church’s ministry which began in the 19th century and still influences us today. Going by such names as the “social gospel”, this movement emphasized ministering to the physical needs of people. Rather than preparing people for their heavenly future, advocates of this movement said that the church should take care of people’s needs for the here and now. It should be the ministry of the church to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give money to the poor, and so on. People said that we should emphasize “deeds, not creeds” in our ministry.

Which is right? To only preach the Gospel within the congregation and reach out with the Gospel into the community while ignoring physical suffering is wrong. Jesus condemns people on the

Last Day who have not cared for those in need when He said, “For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.” (Matt 25:42-43)

On the other hand, for the Church to simply provide food, clothing, shelter, money, and so on to meet people’s present day needs is wrong, too. It ignores Jesus’ command, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:19-20) While such a ministry might help and comfort someone temporarily, it consigns them eternally to hell without the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We can do either of these ministries – spiritual or physical – in the wrong way, as well. We do them with selfish motivations to satisfy some personal or institutional need. For example, I’ve heard people say, “We need to reach out with the Gospel or our church is going to die.” Are we sharing the Gospel to save souls from hell or to save our church from closing?

We may do the same thing in ministering to people’s physical needs. We will provide food, clothing, money, and so on as a means to an end. We want people to like us or we want to get people into church so we use material aid as bait. If you think that’s too harsh of an assessment, have you heard someone say, after helping someone out, “Boy, I did all that and they didn’t even appreciate it, “ or “I did all that and they didn’t even come to church.” Have you said it yourself? Have you ever thought it?

What’s the answer? First, we have to understand the nature of sin. We tend to view it too lightly. Sin has not only corrupted our souls, but it has also corrupted our bodies and everything around us in creation. Sin is not only the reason for us to be damned to hell. Sin is also the reason for all human suffering. It is the reason for hunger, thirst, sickness, poverty, so-called “natural” disasters and so on.

Jesus Christ came into this world, not just to save our souls from hell or to meet all of our bodily needs now, but to redeem us – body and soul – from sin and all of its effects. He did preach and teach in the synagogues, but He did not stay there. He was out among the people. He fed them, healed them, rescued them from demon possession, protected them from storms, and so on. There is never any indication that He did this so that people would follow Him or in order to get them to come back to the synagogue. Jesus did this for one reason – and one reason alone – because He loved them. He saw the harmful toll which sin had taken on them and His unconditional love moved Him to take action, relieve their misery and help them with their bodily needs.

It was that same great love which moved Him to help people with their souls' need as well. He saw the effect sin had on our souls – separating us from God and dooming us to hell. His unconditional love move Him to take our sin, guilt, and punishment on Himself, go to a cross to endure God's wrath and judgment against sin, and relieve our misery. By His death, we have the blight of sin removed from us. By His life, we have life with God now and for all eternity.

We confess that spiritual salvation. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) But that's not all. Our creed is not simply a collection of theological abstractions. We are not souls imprisoned in frail human bodies from which we need to be set free. Jesus did not rise spiritually to life. Jesus rose physically from the dead to life again in a human body. We confess, "I believe...in the resurrection of the body." We look forward not just to the saving of our souls, but the healing of our bodies. As the last book in the Bible states,

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

The Church in our text which lived in the after glow of Jesus' resurrection from the dead got this right. They were not a bunch of spiritual religionists who only contemplated deep theological

thoughts. They were providing for the physical needs of the widows and others in their congregation while, at the same time, preaching and teaching the Word of God. They ministered to the body and they ministered to the soul and saw each as important.

When a problem came up with the social ministry, they did not abandon it because it cost too much nor did they let it overshadow the preaching of the Word of God. The apostles said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty." It's ironic for us who consider the Church to be so spiritual that the early Church's first committee was a social welfare committee.

The apostles and the Church at that time were simply living out the life which Jesus had given them and ministering as He had ministered. The apostles devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry (diakonia) of the Word of God. The newly elected deacons (from the word "diakonia" which means "serve") devoted themselves to the ministry of physical care. And the people in the Church supported them both.

Today, things are no different. We still have the ministry of the Word of God for spiritual needs and the ministry of mercy for physical needs. I have been called by you to serve in the first area of ministry. You have elected various people to serve in the second area of ministry. And you support them both.

We do these things, not simply out of obedience to God's command to "love your neighbor yourself", but also out of love for Christ. There are no conditions or ulterior motivations, whether we are sharing the Gospel or sharing food or money. We do it out of love for our neighbor and by the love of Christ. In baptism, you were joined to Jesus Christ. Because of that, as St. Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20)

As the Word of God increased, the numbers of disciples multiplied greatly for the Church in Jerusalem. I see no reason not to expect the same for the church in Great Falls. As we minister with the Word of God so that people's souls might be saved and as we minister with our physical resources so that people's bodily needs might be met, the love of Christ Jesus will be demonstrated, given, and received in word and deed. And where there is the Word of God and the love of Christ, there is also growth.

Many of us fight the "battle of bulge" in our attempts to lose weight. Some will say the best answer is to eat right. Others will say the best answer is to exercise. I'm no doctor, but if you eat right but don't exercise, you'll probably stay about the same. And if you exercise and continue to eat a lot of bad things, you'll might gain weight, not lose it. It's not a question of "either/or", but "both/and". The best answer is to eat right and exercise regularly.

In the same way, if we think the best way to minister is to simply preach the Word of God while people around us suffer, they may not care or listen to us. If we think the best way to minister is to just feed the hungry and provide for the poor while failing to tell them the Gospel, we may have a lot of people who are well fed and comfortable in hell. It's not a question of "either/or", but "both/and". Ministry involves ministering to the soul and ministering to the body. The slogan should not be "Deeds, not Creeds", but "Creeds Therefore Deeds." Amen.