

## “Why the World May Not Know God”

I John 3:1-7 – April 26, 2009

INTRO: It is believed that this letter was written to a community in conflict. Some may have doubted that Christ was really a human being. There was disagreement and division and some people didn't show love and care to those who held different opinions. Some left the community. Addressed to the early church, the purpose of this little book was to remind people who Jesus is and how people should live.

I have a friend who works in an auto dealership located right downtown, in a large city. For a long time, it's been rumored that the dealership might have to move closer to the Interstate, because of development taking place downtown. I asked him whether that was going to happen. He said, for the time being, he thinks they are staying where they are. He hopes they never move, because this is a good location--hundreds of people drive that route each day. They're not traveling at such a high speed, like they would be on the Interstate, so they can take time to look at the new and used cars in their lot. And their current location is right on the street, where people can see exactly what they've got to offer.

I sometimes think that part of our problem as followers of Christ is that the world too often doesn't see what we have to offer. They don't see it, either because we've blended in so well, assimilated with everybody else, that we don't look any different than the world around us. Or the world has made assumptions about us that may or may not be correct. Diana Butler Bass who writes of her journey in and out of a number of churches says: “In the minds of many, church going conjures negative images. Church people are dull, narrow, anti-intellectual, and unimaginative. They live by a list of does and don'ts.” (*Strength for the Journey*)

Some people are indifferent to Christianity, others have had negative, judgmental experiences and found Christians don't look very much like the one we claim to follow. “Many do not want to know Jesus because of what they think they know of his church.” (R. Craig MacCreary)

People may reject the church or Christianity in general because we aren't always good advertisements for it. They look at us and see what we have to offer and say, “no thanks.”

In our reading, we hear that the members of the early faith community are rejected by some, but they are rejected because the world didn't know God and they couldn't recognize followers of Christ, maybe because they didn't know what they were looking for. Today though, even though the church or Christians may meet rejection, it may be a different story. People may shy away because of what the world thinks of the church and of organized religion—and sometimes for good reason.

In the original setting of that early church, the responsibility seemed to fall upon those who didn't know God—they were the ones that were lacking and needed to get their act together. Today, I would say the responsibility is on us. Because if we don't do a good job of showing the world who God is, who Christ is, by the way we speak and act and think, then how will the world know God? How will they know what we are offering unless they see it in us?

Patterned after the beginning of this third chapter, the writer of such a letter might say to us today: “What marvelous love God has extended to us! Just look at it—we're called children of God! That's who we really are.” (*The MESSAGE*)

But the world doesn't know that, or may not know God, because they don't see God's love alive in us. “If we belong to God, then we are to be like the one whose children we are.” (*Homiletics*, 5/03)

There's a story about a man who found an eagle's egg and put it in a hen's nest. The eaglet hatched and grew up among the chickens. He scratched the earth for food, he clucked and cackled, and even flew a few feet into the air. One day he saw a magnificent bird above him, and asked: “Who's that?” A nearby chicken said, “That's the eagle, the king of the birds. He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth—we're chickens.” So, the eagle lived and died a chicken, for that's what he thought he was. (adapted from Anthony deMello, *Awareness*)

Our identity is that we are children of God, and we're meant to live out of that identity. And that is both an awesome gift and an awesome responsibility. We need to “live up to who we understand ourselves to be, and behave in ways that are consistent with the honor of being children of God.” (Won Hur)

How can others know God if we don't act like God's children? How can they know God, if competition is more our way of life than collaboration? How can they know God, if we're certain we

have the only answers, to the exclusion of all other possible answers? How can they know God, if we are intent to only show care and concern for some of God's people and not others?

Being children of God needs to be a visible reality, especially to those who don't share our experience and understanding of God. Our behavior is to be consistent with God's love for all of God's children. We are to more and more resemble our Creator. "Being in a right relationship with God, as a child of God, is to see another through God's eyes, to consider the other with a broad-minded mercy." (Stephanie Ford)

We haven't always done that well. There's a current PBS offering called "The American Experience-We Shall Remain." It's about the history of Native American people in our country, and it's being aired on Monday evenings. Our history with Native American people is not an easy thing to watch and hear about. The tells us that as the colonists arrived, and Puritan preacher John Eliot began his work, in the process of trying to convert the Indians to Christianity, Praying Villages were formed. The Native American people who wanted to follow Christ were moved into these villages, and they were bound by strict rules of Puritan conduct. The culture of native tribes was quickly eroded. The effect of this was that, by about 1640, the Massachuset tribe ceased to exist as a separate people. During King Philip's War, many of the inhabitants of the Praying Villages left their villages and joined Philip in his rebellion. To keep those who stayed behind from also leaving to join the battle, the Puritans rounded them up and relocated them to islands off Boston Harbor where many died of disease and malnutrition. Many loyal natives were killed by the colonists because their activities with the so-called enemy, were suspect.

Sometimes, in the name of Christ, we are not good messengers, when we treat people in ways that identify them as less than children of God. William Sloane Coffin once said: "There are those who prefer certainty to truth, those in church who put the purity of dogma ahead of the integrity of love. And what distortion of the gospel it is to have limited sympathies and unlimited certainties, when the very reverse—to have limited certainties and unlimited sympathies—is not only more tolerant but far more Christian." (*Credo*)

Sometimes what people see of Christianity is not what we wish they would remember. They see us acting in very unchristian ways, and it quite honestly gives Christianity a bad name.

This last week, I saw a story about the Washington Nationals baseball team and Majestic Athletic, the company that makes the uniforms for the Nationals. That company probably wishes people hadn't heard about them, at least, not under these circumstances. Majestic Athletic created jerseys for two of the players, that mistakenly read "Natinals". They were misspelled—an omission of a very important "o". What's very crazy is that they misspelled the name of the team that's from the place where the National Spelling Bee is held--what an embarrassment for the company! Probably for awhile, they will be remembered as the company that can't spell very well or needs better proofreaders.

The world sometimes sees the worst side of a company, of an individual, of a group of people. But every now and then, somebody does something that is pretty wonderful and quite memorable. 14 year-old Shane White and his family were recently heading from Rhinelander to the National Geographic Geography Bee in Madison. Mom Cindy, Dad Keith, 7 of their 11 children and two foreign exchange students from Portugal and Thailand took off before the sun was up in their 1989 motor home. The motor home showed its age as it lost power, at first refusing to go more than 45 mph and then sputtering along at 25 mph. Keith pulled off the freeway at Westfield, which put them 63 miles from where Shane needed to be. Keith went looking for a repair shop, while Cindy and Shane went begging for help--right there at the various gas stations near the interchange at Westfield. Going inside the businesses, Cindy called for everyone's attention. "Is anyone heading to Madison?" she pleaded. "I've got a son who's supposed to be at the state geography bee." They all said no. "And," Shane added, "we got a whole lot of weird looks from people." They went back to the gas station where they had stopped first. By now it was after 8 a.m. Registration at the contest would be starting at 8:30 and the bee at 9. "It's over," Shane told his mom. "That's OK." A worker at the station heard what was going on and whipped out her keys. She told them they could use her car. Shane and his mom could hardly believe it. They didn't even know this woman. They rushed outside, the woman took some items from the car, a 2008 Chevy Impala with a sunroof and only 21,000 miles on it. Cindy hugged the woman and she and Shane took off for Madison. The other kids stayed behind with Keith and the RV. Lisa, the generous woman asked only for Cindy's

name and driver's license number. Cindy said they'd be back in several hours. They hurried to Madison, arriving a few minutes after the bee began, but in time for Shane's first question. The Whites filled the Impala's gas tank after they got back to Westfield, but Lisa refused to take any money. No matter how crazy it may have seemed, she saw an urgent need and she acted. In addition, a mechanic in the village fixed the RV. Its catalytic converter was shot. As it turned out, Shane didn't reach the final round or a chance for the nationals in Washington, D.C. But he won't forget where Westfield is and he won't forget those people. *(Journal/Sentinel, 4/8/09)*

We would hope the world remembers a person or a group of people who go out of their way to be compassionate to others, who are also children of God.

Nevada Barr says she is reminded of how we are ALL God's children, every time she says the Lord's Prayer. "Jesus didn't say, 'Jesus' Father who art in heaven, but Our Father.' We've mangled the teachings of the one we professed to follow. Jesus was saying that we ourselves are a very real part of the divine. Us, you and me, and the fellow next door who steals your paper and spends Sunday reading it and drinking his beer. Jesus did not set himself up as a god. He did not put himself above others. He taught that each and every human being was a child of God." *(Seeking Enlightenment Hat by Hat)*

That's what we need to be communicating to each other. What could we be or do, as individuals, or as a Wauwatosa Ave. UMC, that we would be proud to have people remember? We might be remembered not because it made us famous, but because it may have helped others to know Christ better because of our actions. For we are the children of God—we are followers of Christ—and that's above all, what others need to see whenever they look our way.

--Sue Burwell