

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Do You Know What They're Saying About You?

Sunday, October 20

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Church is not what we do one hour a week in this facility or the Sunday school class we attend. Those things are great and they nourish us but that is not when or how church happens. Church is what you and I do every day with our lives to reflect the love of Jesus Christ.

The church is not a building or a worship service. It is us! We are the body of Christ. So church happens at the grocery store, during a play date, on the golf course, at a neighborhood birthday party and at our favorite restaurant!

The spirit of Christ is certainly with us as we worship and study the Bible but the spirit of Christ is also out in our community around everyday people. And Christ calls us to join him in giving people hope. Christ calls us to show people how much God loves them.

God's love doesn't wait on people. It lovingly pursues people and meets them where they are and where they live. And if we believe the love of God is in our hearts, that love is going to pull us to engage people in the world.

This means we have to take a good look at how we engage people in our everyday lives. We have to be mindful of our attitudes and behaviors when we give a server our order or we pick up our dry cleaning or when we interact with other parents at a soccer game. Jesus said:

“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” –Matthew 5:16

Now imagine if every Christian in this world (that's 2.2 billion people, over 30 percent of the world's population) would get up every day, read this verse and say, “Today I am going to let my light shine.

With every person I meet, in every circumstance I am in, I am going to let my light shine.” Could you imagine what this world would be like? It would be a different world! It would be the kingdom of God!

Unfortunately, for many Christians it is “lights out!” They have turned out their lights by favoring judgment over grace, hate over love, rules over relationships, dogma over forgiveness, and despair over hope.

Gallup released their latest statistic on organized religion. It is not pretty. American confidence in organized religion has hit an all-time low. According to Gallup only 44 percent of Americans have a good deal of confidence in organized religion.

Of course, Gallup said that one of the reasons why the percentage has dropped over the years is because of widely publicized scandals, like child sex abuse in the Roman Catholic Church and the moral corruption and financial greed of TV evangelists.

This may be true, but I believe there is more to the story than that. Scandal has always existed in the church because the church is made up of human beings. No, I think there is something else which has caused the dramatic decline in confidence in organized religion and the church.

Let me explain. A few years ago a religious survey group similar to Gallup called Barna did a study that revealed 40% of young adults in America, ages 16-29 had rejected the church. Why? Not because of Jesus, not because of theology, not because of worship styles, but because of the Christians they have known. And what is it about the Christians they have known they don't like? You guessed it:

Pride, superiority, self-righteousness, a judgmental spirit.

This is what they are saying about us...Is it any wonder that over half of Americans don't have much respect or confidence in the church?

Let me take a few moments and address the one area where Christians seem to lose their salt and light. Politics. Political mudslinging is at an all-time high right now, and often times it is those who profess to be Christians who are the worst at it. Let me give you an example:

A colleague of mine tells of a young adult that started coming to his church. She was 24 and she had never been a church-goer, but there were things going on in her life and she felt led to come to church. She happened to be a democrat and she discovered that many of the political issues that she cared about Jesus also cared about: poverty, the welfare of children, social justice issues. But once she got involved in the church she quickly discovered that many people she came across told her, in a matter of words, that her political convictions were not compatible with Christianity. In fact, she said that people told her that she could not be a Christian and a democrat.

I hope that something like that never happens at our church, whether a person is a democrat or a republican. The church is politically neutral ground, and in our greatly polarized society the church is about the only place left where people with different political views can come together in love and dialogue about their differences. I hope that we are a church where our number one priority is our faith in Jesus Christ. And because our faith in Christ in our number one concern we can disagree with each other on political issues and learn from each other. We can love each other, grow together, and sing together.

No one political party has a monopoly on the truth. Jesus does not belong to a particular political party. When churches and Christian groups begin to align themselves exclusively with any political party, dangerous and destructive things occur. History has taught us this.

Now, it is important that we as Christians get involved in political issues. Our faith is personal, but it is never private. But our involvement in politics should be an expression of our faith. Therefore, our practice of politics should be different than the rest of the world. We should never participate in slander, gossip, or dirty politics. Instead, we should be respectful, humble and willing to dialogue with those we disagree with.

Unfortunately, so often just the opposite occurs. A while back, I had a Christian friend of mine forward me an e-mail that said mean-spirited and slanderous things about a particular political candidate. It was one of these forwards that were going around everywhere. Many of my pastor friends received it. It was total garbage – all of it! All my friend had to do was do a little research and he would see that all of it was garbage. Instead, he sent it anyway. That was slander. The saddest thing is that many of these slanderous e-mails come from Christians.

Let us remember what Paul says to us in Ephesians 4:

“I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear...Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

You know, Jesus' opponents tried to trap Jesus in a political argument once. It is in Matthew 22. Jesus' response teaches us a great lesson on humility. They ask him if it is acceptable for them to pay taxes to the Roman government. This was a trick question. The Jews could not stand paying taxes to the Romans. They wanted to be free from them. And they believed that the Messiah would come and free them from any obligations to the Roman government. If he said yes, the people would turn against him. If he said no, he would be arrested.

So, Jesus responds brilliantly. He asked them to show him a coin, a denarius. Then he asks them whose image is on the coin. “The emperor.” Then Jesus said, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperors, and to God the things that are God.”

What did Jesus mean? What Jesus was saying is that there are certain things that belong to the world, our material things, the taxes we owe to the government. We must respect that and do what is necessary, but our heart, our souls belong to God. The image of God is on our souls, nothing else. And we have a tendency to forget this. As we get caught up in political arguments or particular issues, our pride gets puffed up and we think that our heart belongs to our political party, or our nation, or our agenda. And Jesus says, “No, if you follow me, your heart belongs to me and therefore you act differently than the rest of the world.”

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. ⁶Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt. –Colossians 4:5-6

There are a lot of lonely and hurting people in the world who just want to be listened to and loved. They need our light. We live in what sociologists call the “Age of the Lonely Crowd.” It is true. There are many people in the midst of a great crowd who are lonely and hurting. They are in restaurants, in shopping malls, at school, and in the house next door to you. Jesus said, “I want you to love one another as I have loved you.”

You want to know the truth. It is not our words or insights that lonely and hurting people want most. It is simply our presence. I learn this over and over again as a minister. Most of the time people aren’t looking for words or insights from me, as if I had that much to offer. Most of the time people simply want my presence. My understanding. My love.

Tony Campolo tells the story of going to a funeral to pay his respects to the family of acquaintance of his. By mistake he ended up in the wrong parlor. It held the body of an elderly man and his widow was the only person present. She seemed so lonely that

Campolo decided to stay for the funeral. He even drove with her to the cemetery.

At the end of the graveside service as he and the woman were driving away, Campolo finally confessed that he did not know her husband. She replied, “I thought so. I didn’t recognize you. But it doesn’t really matter.” Then she squeezed his arm so hard it hurt and said, “You’ll never, ever know, what this means to me.”

When I talked with people about those who have helped them the most, they never name a philosopher. You know who they usually name? A quiet, unassuming person who was there whenever needed. Someone who listened more than talked. Someone who didn’t keep looking down at a watch, but instead hugged, touched and cried. Someone who was available.

There are people you come across every day who are starving for love and light. They may look like they have it all together. They may be smiling. But inside they are starving for grace, love and light. What are we going to do about it?

We stayed in a hotel here in Atlanta a few years ago. Brandy and I got up the next morning to enjoy the hotel’s free breakfast! As we sat and ate, I watched as one of the hotel workers was running around like crazy helping everyone. A plate crashed and she swept it up. The phone rang and she ran to grab it. A man came out of a conference room complaining about the PA system. She took a towel and cleaned up a table. And she did all of this with a smile.

On our way to the elevator I ran into her and said, “We have been watching you and I am amazed at how hard you work and you do it with a smile. You look like a human octopus, doing ten things at once!” I will never forget the look she gave me. It was a look like she had never heard anyone say that to her before but had been dying to hear it. She almost started to cry.

When we came back down from our room to turn in our key she was at the front desk. We encouraged her some more and she said, “Who are you people?”

She found out I was a pastor and said, “I don’t go to church, but I am ready to go to your church!” Then she said, “Will ya’ll adopt me?” I said, “How old do you think we are?”

People are starving for our light. Once they see our light, they will be ready to hear our message. But we must lead with our light.

Let me ask you: If you are a Christian here today, are you letting your light shine? If not, why not? People are watching us. Folks who are not Christians are watching us wondering if our message has any credibility. And they are going to talk about us, regardless. Are we revealing the light of Christ? If not, why should they bother with our faith? They don’t expect us to be perfect, but they do expect to see some evidence that the penetrating light of Christ is real. And how can they know unless we let it shine? Often times we only have one chance to make a good impression.

Either we believe Jesus Christ is the help and hope of the world or we don’t. Either we believe Jesus is the light of the world or we don’t. Either we believe the light of Christ is within us or we don’t.

Sometimes people will leave worship and say to me, “I loved that service! I don’t know why the whole sanctuary isn’t packed every Sunday.” I always say, “Me too! When was the last time you invited someone to church?” When was the last time you invited someone to church?

One of my favorite things to do is to drive around the church at night and see our beautiful steeple.

Sometimes I will park in front of it and pray for myself and the church, asking God to give us the power to continue to let our light shine.

Today’s message is simple: Be the change you want to see in the world! I don’t know who said that, but they were right! “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me!” Be the kind of person who when people meet you they talk about your light. They don’t say, “Another judgmental Christian...” Instead, they say, “I want what they have.”

Shine your light on someone this week. Encourage someone. Lift someone up. Write someone a kind note. Invite someone to church and take them to lunch. Call a loved one and tell them that you love them. Share your faith with a friend. Never underestimate the power of God’s light within you.

A couple of weeks ago Allen and I went to Chili’s for lunch after worship. We had a wonderful, attentive waitress. We were curious about her experience of the church crowds she waited on, so we asked her about it. She said, “First of all, most of them are terrible tippers.” Ouch. Then she said, “Honestly, some of them are just rude, bossing me around, in a hurry, complaining about this and that. I mean, they were just in church. Didn’t they hear anything the preacher said?”

What are they saying about you? What are they saying about me? What are they saying about us?

