

What Would Jesus Say About Modern Churches?

Mark 1:4-11

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The Church is of God and shall be preserved to the end of time as the visible body of Christ on earth. The local church remains God's best hope for humanity. For a lifetime now, the Church has captured my heart, my mind, and my deepest devotion. After all these years I can still join Timothy Dwight in saying:

Beyond my highest joys I prize her heavenly ways.

Her sweet communion, solemn vows, her hymns of love and praise.

I love the Church. Because I love it so much, I want God's very best for it. So I spend my days and many nights pondering ways to fulfill God's vision for this community of faith. Sometimes I find myself asking, "If Jesus came to our church to spend a day or two, if he came for just a visit, I wonder what he would say for us to do?" This sermon is an attempt to answer that question.

If Jesus came to our church to spend a day or two, I think he would say: **Make the main Man the main thing.** Christ himself is Christianity. When John the Baptist came preaching a baptism of repentance on the shores of the Jordan River, he was quick to announce his place in the scheme of things. *After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.* He will bring salvation. All of us in the Church, and especially those of us who lead the Church, could do well to embrace that spirit of humility. This is not your church. This is not my church. In spite of the trust clauses in our deeds, the church does not belong to the Methodist Denomination. The Church belongs to Christ. We must seek his will. We must follow his ways. We must do his work while it is still day.

When Jesus came to Caesarea of Philippi he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Off the cuff, the disciples reported the latest polls. Some say you are a born again John the Baptist. Some say you are a reincarnated Elijah. Still others think you rank with the great prophets like Jeremiah. By and large you are doing pretty well in the polls, Jesus.

Without blinking an eye, Jesus personalizes the whole proposition and puts it bluntly, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" Peter, at one of his finest moments, replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Here at the dawn of the 21st century even those of us who call ourselves Christians are continually confronted with the probing question. "What shall we think

of Christ?” Shall we make him one of many, in an effort to be tolerant of all? Shall we make him the enemy of everyone who fail upon his name to call? Shall we accept him as Savior, embrace Him as Lord, and follow him as faithful disciples, as people in one accord? It is time for the Church to clarify its Christology.

If Jesus came to our church to spend a day or two, I think he would say: **Discover the power of prayer.** Have you heard the story about the preacher and the taxi cab driver who happened to die at the same moment? Arriving at the gate of St. Peter simultaneously, the taxi cab driver is awarded a fabulous palace, complete with fountains, vast lawns, and an army of servants. Meanwhile, the preacher is moved into a modest home for eternity. Discerning the discrepancy of the situation, the preacher complains to St. Peter. “Look, I have spent all my life in service and ministry to others. If this guy deserves a palace, so do I.” To which St. Peter replied, “Up here we go strictly by results. When you preached, people slept. When he drove, people prayed!”

A kind of pragmatic secularism has crept into the Church. While people continue to profess a belief in a supernatural God, they proceed to order their lives in ways that short circuits that belief. One of the hardest things to find in church is a prayer meeting. Look at your church bulletin. We offer sermons, seminars, receptions, studies, workshops, blood drives, auctions, choirs, and even “Super Undie” Sunday, but where is the prayer? I am not pointing fingers, I am making a confession.

On the high and holy celebration of Passover, Jesus goes up to the temple at Jerusalem. In the crowded courtyard of this complex place of worship, Jesus finds a farmers market of cattle, sheep, pigeons, and doves. With a whip in his hand and anger in his voice, this carpenter’s son, whom we often label as meek and mild, makes a clean sweep of the place, turning tables, scattering coins, causing confusion. When things settle down a bit, this is what he says: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.”

While there is nothing in the Bible encouraging us to go and do likewise, it would be helpful for us to remember wherein our power lies. “I baptize you with water,” says John, “but the one who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” There is a will of God. The will of God can be known. The way to know the will of God is to pray. John Wesley said, “God does nothing but in answer to prayer.” United Methodist Women began a new prayer campaign last month. The announcement included this statement: “Imagine if the world heard that the churches in the United States cared enough to pray that there will be no war. We could revolutionize the way some other countries look at America.”

If Jesus came to our church to spend a day or two, I believe he would say: **Seek the lost while**

they may be found. After a lunch that restored the integrity of a prosperous tax collector named Zaccheus, Jesus said, “The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.” To be lost is to be misplaced, mislaid, misguided, misused, and missing. The human problem of lostness is so great, that even newspapers run daily ads describing items that are lost and found. Lost in Nashville yesterday: 11 dogs, 2 cats, and several rings. One ad reads, “God works in mysterious ways and I am praying you will play a role in returning heirloom wedding and engagement rings that were lost over the holidays.”

I don't know if God cares about lost rings; I know He cares about lost people. When religious persons criticized Jesus for spending too much time with tax collectors and sinners, he gave them a trilogy of parables describing God's compassion for the lost. One sheep is lost out of a hundred; the good shepherd leaves the 99 and searches for the one. A coin is misplaced and a house cleaning happens until the coin is found. A lost boy comes home and a father throws a party that is out of this world to welcome him back.

When Jesus was leaving earth he said to his disciples, “*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them all that I have commanded you.*” How does this happen in the 21st Century? Let me share a specific way.

Ginny Wheeler was raised in a family that never professed faith nor went to church. She became a teacher, married Lee, and 11 years later had their first child, Kathy. When Kathy got old enough for preschool, Ginny researched the neighborhood and discovered the best one in town to be at a neighborhood church. After a few months at preschool, Kathy came home one day and asked her mother why they never went to Sunday school. The next Sunday the Wheeler family attended worship and were pleasantly surprised at the wonderful welcome and meaningful worship. In time they joined. Ginny volunteered to teach Sunday school and then suddenly discovered she knew nothing about the Bible herself. So in addition to teaching, she enrolled in Disciple Bible Study. Excited about learning the faith, she started telling Cousin Janet and her husband Don about it at dinner. They decided to attend as well, even though Don had never been inside a church. Ginny began sharing her faith in positive ways with others too: parents at the soccer field, mothers of Girl Scouts. When Kathy's friends came over to spend Saturday night they were invited to worship with the Wheelers the next day. Some of them liked it and asked their parents to bring them to church. It didn't happen all at once, but within a few years, 20 people became people of faith all because a preschooler went home one day and said, “Why don't we go to Sunday school?” Lost people matter to God, do they matter to you?

If Jesus came to our church to spend a day or two, I believe he would say: **Lose yourselves in order to find yourselves.** Certain things must die in order for better things to live. That is

what baptism is all about. We are buried with Christ in baptism in order that we can be raised with Christ to new life. Pride must go. Prestige no longer matters. Position is a misnomer.

When I earned my doctorate degree my farmer father said to me, “I always thought those little initials after peoples’ names were sort of like a tail on a pig: kind of cute to look at but they don’t really make any more hog.”

And Jesus said of hypocrisy, “You are like white washed tombs, beautiful on the outside but full of dead bones on the inside.” “Finder’s keepers, loser’s weepers,” that is the American way. Jesus turned that saying around. ‘Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.’ Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more. We are not called to protect and prevent – we are called to release and rejoice.

Come to the water and remember your baptism. You have been initiated into the body of Christ. You are the hope of the world. You are water-washed and spirit-filled people of God and by God’s grace and your devotion, the best days of the Church are yet to be.

Amen.

