

When Christians Get It Wrong: When Christian Get it Right

I John 4:11-21

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The fastest growing church in our Northern California-Nevada Conference is the Santa Clara Korean United Methodist church; just a few miles away. They are now the third largest church in our Conference with almost 1,000 members.

According to research cited by Rev. Doug Anderson, director of the Bishop Rueben Job Center for Leadership Development at Dakota Wesleyan University in South Dakota, the average Korean United Methodist in the USA invites two people each year to join their church. The average Anglo-American Methodist in the USA invites one person to join their church every 38 years!

Emigrant churches have the benefit of a close knit community based on common heritage, language and the stress of assimilation within a dominant culture. They reach out to form community in an often bewildering world, inviting friends and family and even strangers to join them.

Church folk within the dominant culture base often base their faith experience on personal preferences rather than a commitment to reach out beyond their comfort zones and invite new people in.

Jesus consistently invited the 'outsider' inside his circle. He consistently insisted that the 'outsider' had worth and possibility. In a culture that readily drew lines between sacred and profane people, Jesus consistently crossed those lines and welcomed everyone to the table.

When Christians get it right they exhibit a passion for "radical hospitality", in the words of United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase ([Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations](#), Abingdon Press, 2007). Radical hospitality doesn't mean greeting our best and long time friends at church each Sunday and going for brunch afterwards; nothing wrong with that but not to be confused with radical hospitality.

When we warmly greet the new comer in the parking lot or as they enter the church, when our greeters and ushers make the stranger feel at home, when the long time member graciously gives up their favorite pew to the new comer, helps them find the hymnal or explain when to sit down or stand up, that's when the church is getting it right.

Remember Jesus' parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24)? Someone invites his neighbors and friends to a wonderful, opulent feast but they make excuses not to attend. In frustration the host calls out to the servants:

"Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled."

In a culture that equated suffering with the consequence of sin and success as the consequence of righteousness, Jesus is suggesting that the poor, crippled, blind and lame have a seat at the Kingdom of God, especially when the righteous have ignored God in their lives.

Radical hospitality is for the people who are not here!

Our Korean United Methodist brothers and sisters are getting the point when they invite new comers into their church communities. It once was said that “The church is the only club that exists for those who aren’t members!” Numerical growth in a church isn’t about institutional health so much as an indication that its members are just as concerned about those who aren’t here as those who are.

And there are many, many who aren’t here...especially in the Bay Area.

In their book unchristian, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007) David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons report that millions of Americans are considered “outsiders” to the Christian faith; for the generation now between 16-29 years old, 40% no longer see the Christian faith as relevant to their spirituality. (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 18) They conclude that to address the alienation felt by so many ‘outsiders’ to Christianity, we inside the faith need...

“...to shift our reputation, Christ followers must learn to respond to people in the way Jesus did. In other words, to reverse the problem of unchristian faith, we have to see people, addressing their needs and their criticism, just as Jesus did. We have to be defined by our service and sacrifice, by lives that exude humility and grace. If young outsiders say they can’t see Jesus in our lives, we have to solve our ‘hidden Jesus problem.’” (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 206)

The writer of the first letter of John knew this to be true. One can’t say they love God and hate their neighbors because God is love. The Christian life is defined by ‘agape’ in the original language used throughout this text. ‘Agape’ love is that love that seeks the welfare of the other over and above one’s own needs, wants and desires. ‘Agape’ love gives itself away, again and again. As the old song says, “They will know we are Christian by our love.”

All of the attention given to the ten misguided Idaho Baptists arrested for trying to take orphans out of Haiti without proper documentation is amazing when we consider the thousands of Christian volunteers right now in Haiti doing hazardous relief work. Little has been said in the media about the deaths of United Methodist pastors Sam Dixon and Clint Rabb in the earthquake last month, giving their lives for the on-going work of UMCOR in that nation.

Yet Kinnaman and Lyons’ research suggest that the media plays only a minor role (9%) in forming the public’s perception of Christianity. (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 31) Rather most of the outsiders interviewed for their book had enormous firsthand experience of Christians and the church; most had gone to churches before and nearly 9 out of ten of them personally knew Christians, many of them as friends. Their book suggests that 50 million Americans admitted they had had negative personal histories with churches or Christians, and of young people aged 16-29, 30% reported having experienced hurtful encounters with Christianity. (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 33)

They will know we are Christian by our love?

Many of us will celebrate St. Valentine's Day today with little knowledge about the love he practiced.

Valentine was a priest and/or Bishop in Rome who was martyred in 269 CE. Valentine, along with St. Marius and his wife Martha, helped Christians escape the persecution of Caesar Claudius II. It seems that one of Claudius' favorite sports was to herd Christians into Rome's amphitheater where their bodies were shot through with arrows and then burned.

Early in 269, after one of these spectacles, Valentine, Martha and Marius, with their two sons, were caught collecting the ashes of slain Christians in the amphitheater. They were all jailed and tortured.

Legend has it that Valentine wrote beautiful and profound letters from his jail cell to the underground church in Rome. He hoped to inspire their faith. Finally, on February 14th, Valentine and the others were themselves killed; Martha by drowning, the men and children beaten to death with clubs and then be-headed.

Please excuse the graphic description of violence, but the truth of St. Valentine's life has little to do with the fiction of romantic love letters and Cupid shooting arrows of passion!

His was a life defined by 'agape' love. And today in America, those standing outside the faith are waiting to see if we inside the Christian community are living it; from how we greet them in church, to how we relate to them at work or in our families, to the ways we serve the community and world.

An email from a committed member of our church with young adult children at home seriously alienated from the church and cynical of our goals, gently warned me not to spend a lot of time "patting ourselves on the back" when we got to today's sermon in this series. The parent wrote, "...give us simple, practical answers to how we can get things right..." The experience of this parent suggests that we have a long way to go to be heard and respected by the majority of neighbors around us who have dismissed the claims of our faith.

The research suggests that 'outsiders', especially the young have not lost their spirituality. In fact, they are looking for places and people where they can make sense of life and find purpose and meaning in it. When the church is seen as a place respecting and resourcing just such a journey, we will be getting it right!

Yesterday, 37 members and friends of this church flew off to Mississippi at their own expense to continue the post-Katrina rebuilding effort. This is the sixth team from LAUMC. Long after government and non-profit disaster response has been over, it will be the faith communities of this nation that will have helped the most to serve our brothers and sisters along the Gulf Coast.

In the last month, members of this congregation have raised over \$ 29,500.00 to fund scholarships for women in Africa to attend university who otherwise would not have the opportunity to do so.

Last year we welcomed 113 new members into our church, many if not most, not involved with any previous church, and found their way here by first bringing their children to our weekday Preschool program, then to our Sunday morning Christian Education program, both of which is open to all members of our community.

Christians get it right when we welcome the outsider and make them feel at home.

Christians get it right when we sacrifice comfort and resources to love another.
Christians get it right when our lives are defined by 'agape': "...doing justice,
loving kindness and walking humbly with God".

Amen.