

“I am a Christian”: Christ through us

John 3

A sermon preached at Cuba UMC on July 8, 2011 by Joseph Frana

27 To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. 28 You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ 29 The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. 30 He must become greater; I must become less.”

“That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.”

I am a Christian. Like saying, “I am baptized” this means that there is more to me than meets the eye.

But funny enough, what makes there be more to me than meets the eye is the increasing reality that there is less to me than meets the eye.

Because I am a Christian, “He must become greater; I must become less.”

Last Sunday I said, because I am baptized, “I am dead, and only in death to self am I alive in Christ.”

This Sunday, I am saying something very similar. Today I witness that I am a Christian.

“I am a Christian.” You might think, “Duh, you’re the pastor” But I mean something stronger than you may assume.

Last Sunday, I said that “I died” when I was baptized. I explained that I didn’t mean that the preacher held me under water too long, but that in the action of baptism I renounced my life – I said that my life is no longer mine, and that a new life was given to me by God with Christ now living within me.

Last Sunday, I said, “I am a baptized one among baptized ones.” That as lead baptist I serve at the Bath in order to help us all live out our baptism.

This Sunday, I say, “I am a Christian.” Now what do I mean by this?

First simply look at the word. “Christ-ian” The main part of the word is not a reference to me but to Christ. Simply put – Christian is supposed to describe

something in relationship to Christ. Something is Christian inasmuch as Christ is displayed through it.

So when I say, "I am a Christian" I am not trying to talk about my religion or my philosophy or my voting block or any human thing. When I say "I am a Christian" I am trying to talk about God doing something through me. When I say "I am a Christian" I am trying to talk about living in such a way that it is not I but Christ who is acting through me.

Okay, point made? When I say "I am Christian" I am not talking about me, but I am talking about Christ. Got that? Let me fill this out with a couple stories.

[Examples from my family]

Anne Kenya, why? Compassionate? Not Christ, but Anne.

Take Eden Kenya, why? Worldly? Not Christ, but us.

[Examples from congregation]

So when I talk about "I am a Christian" I am not talking about being a nice person. When I talk about our church being a Christian church, I am not describing our church. When I say our church is Christian I am not saying our church is friendly or that we sing songs about Jesus or that we love each other. When I say our church is Christian I am saying the Christ is here. We are the body of Christ.

Our life as Christians isn't about being nice or respectable or any thing else like that. Our life as Christians is about being the body of Christ.

Christ is doing work here and now. And somehow and for some reason we are the people chosen through whom he is doing that work.

Being Christian isn't about us. It is about Christ.

And it is amazing how important that distinction is.

For one thing

All kinds of things are labeled Christian. All kinds of people are labeled or label themselves Christian. These labels are helpful for what they are, but they can be misleading.

A person can think: I go to church. I read my Bible (at least I have a Bible next to my bed). I am nice to people and I even help out the needy sometimes. I am a Christian. Now all those things are good things, but those good things do not a Christian make. Christ makes Christians. Now this distinction is important to notice. A person can become satisfied with being a good person and doing good things and even call themselves a Christian and be an active member of a United Methodist Church and at the same time have nothing to do with Jesus Christ. And worse yet, because they do good, feel good, and go to church they are already self-satisfied and pay no mind when Christ calls them by name and invites them to follow him.

A church can think: We have a cross in our worship space and a Bible on a table. The preacher says Jesus a lot and we are friendly. We are a good Christian church. Maybe, but maybe not. A cross and a Bible, and talking about Jesus and being friendly are good and maybe even necessary things for a church to be Christian – but they do not make a church a Christian church. Christ does. A church can be satisfied that it is a friendly Bible believing church and totally miss being a church that follows Jesus. And worse yet, because the church is happy and does a few good things and pays its bills it pays no mind when Christ calls them by name and invites them to follow him.

Being Christian is not a description of a person or a thing – it is a statement about an act of God.

Christ has done something and is continuing to do something in this time and place. God is present and alive.

AND WE ARE HIS BODY!! AND THAT IS OUR COMPLETE JOY.

And we need to live so and say so! And parents, if not for our own sakes, then for the of our children and youth.

Christian Smith recently published the results the most in depth study of the faith of teenagers. The study found that the children and youth that we call Christian and call themselves Christian are by and large not Christians but what he calls “moralistic therapeutic deists.” Interpreting those results Kenda Dean calls our children and youth “almost Christian.”

The conclusion of this study of the faith of teenagers is that their faith they call Christian has deviated from historical Christian belief and practice, into a feel good, do good, deism.

This seems to be the case because Christian churches, both liberal and conservative, and Christian men and women, both liberal and conservative, have deviated from historical Christian belief and practice into a feel good, do good, deism.

So how can we address this fact that we and our children tend not to be Christian, but almost Christian?

We can become less, so that he can become greater.
We can learn to quit focusing upon ourselves and learn to focus upon Christ.

Being Christian is not a description of a person or a thing – it is a statement about an act of God.

So what can we do with our children so that we encourage them to be Christian instead of almost Christian? We can live out the fact that Christ has done something and is continuing to do something in this time and place. That God is present and alive. That we are his body.

We can do things that can only be explained by an act of God. And I am not talking about supernatural phenomena. I am talking about something far more down to earth. I am talking about a woman who goes halfway around the world, not because she cares about African orphans, but because Christ cares about African orphans. I am talking about a family that takes their infant halfway around the world, not because they want their daughter to be cultured, but because Christ has made that young American girl the sister of young African boys and girls. I am talking about a Church that does things with great faith, hope, and love – not because they are faithful, hopeful, and loving people, but because Christ is our faith, hope, and love.

I am a Christian, because as a member of the body of Christ, Christ lives through me.

WE ARE HIS BODY!! AND THAT IS OUR COMPLETE JOY.

John the Baptist knew something about this strange reality. John the Baptist was a good man, a godly man, a wise man – but even greater than all those things – he knew that he was not the Messiah. He knew that it was not about him. John said, “He must become greater, I must become less.”

He pointed to Jesus, and got out of the way.

“Look, there is Jesus . . .” [Move into communion liturgy]