

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Do what now?

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So last week I shared with you about how we often misunderstand the word “repentance.” I tried to make the point that in its most basic sense “repentance” simply means to “think different” in the words of that old Apple Inc. advertising campaign. Well, if last week was about changing our thinking then this week is about what comes next. Once you’ve repented and are working to change your thinking, once you’ve experienced the life that is true life by stepping onto the Way of Christ, what next? What does that actually mean?

Now, I don’t know about you, but I have often found that thoughts, words, and actions are quite interconnected. Science will even back me up on this. Have you ever heard of laughter therapy? It’s the idea behind the movie “Patch Adams” from 1998 starring Robin Williams and Philip Seymour Hoffman (may they both rest in peace). The film is actually semi-biographical, following the life and practice of Dr. Hunter (aka Patch) Adams. Dr. Adams, a Virginian by the way, utilized comedy in treating his patients, often visiting them dressed as a clown.

What Dr. Adams understood, and this was later confirmed through studies, was that if you could get people laughing and improve their mood, they would often heal faster and recover more completely than otherwise. More recent studies have shown that even forcing yourself to laugh or smile for a few minutes will start to improve your mood. Conversely, as I am sure many of us have experienced, when we find ourselves obsessing over what’s wrong in our lives, or the world around us, our mood will darken quickly and that can impact our bodies. Mind, body, and emotion are linked together.

All of this is to say that if we **truly** start to change our thinking, it will have an impact on more than just our thoughts, it will impact our entire being. Thinking differently will lead to feeling differently, seeing differently, and living

differently. We would benefit greatly as a society if we learned to approach ourselves (and others) as complete human beings. We are not just our brains or our bodies or our emotions. We are all of those things, and they all interact and affect each other.

Now what does this interconnectedness have to do with the Beatitudes? I believe the beatitudes (and the words of prophets like Micah) show how the change in our thinking leads to new understanding of the world and people. This new understanding will motivate us to be different. Repentance changes us entirely.

An encounter with the Word of God, Jesus Christ, causes many to begin to think different. That different thinking typically opens our eyes to how our world is upside down to what God created it to be. Our human values and priorities, those on the Way of Christ realize, are completely backwards. Our human values say things like if you're grieving you just need to get over it and move on. Worldly values honor the strong and ruthless. Human values mean prioritizing personal comfort over the basic needs of others. We become consumed with pursuing power, wealth, and influence.

But the Way of Christ upends human values. The Way of Christ means seeing the needs of the people around us and seeking to serve those needs. The Way of Christ is counter cultural. It emphasizes giving up power and possessions rather than hoarding ever more and more. It teaches that peace can only exist where true justice is present. It values mercy rather than being cutthroat and meekness over strength. And being counter cultural means that walking the way of Christ will lead us into conflict with the world's values and priorities.

Is it any wonder then that Paul warns the church at Corinth that the Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross, is foolishness to the world? The world of "might makes right" simply cannot comprehend how giving up power is the surest path to peace and justice. Those who wield violence cannot understand how that violence harms, not just those they wield it against, but themselves and the world too.

The body camera footage of the murder of Tyre Nichols by five police officers in Memphis was released this last week. I do not recommend viewing it, as it is brutal and disturbing. One of the most disturbing things about it, I found, is how nonchalantly those police officers acted after the beating was over while Tyre was dying in front of them. Such an attitude is only possible if you no

longer view someone as human. This is just another example of where pursuing the world's values and priorities gets you. Tyre's murder is the end result of the "might makes right" worldly path.

As walkers of the Way of Christ we are called to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. We are called to be peacemakers and comforters; to be merciful and meek. We are called to pursue righteousness with a singlemindedness (purity) of heart. We are called to be humble and willing to give up power for the sake of our neighbors. We are called to love and serve God and neighbor.

This Way makes no sense to the world, to the cosmos which stands in opposition to God. And yes, walking this Way means we will be taken advantage of. It means willingly putting ourselves in harms way for the sake of others. It means calling out injustice and empowering those who have been oppressed. It means responding to violence with love and standing with the oppressed and marginalized. It means being willing to go to the Cross as the one who leads us on this Way did.

And once again I find myself wondering how on earth the teachings of Christ gained such popularity. Why on earth would anyone want to walk this Way when it so often means enduring suffering and standing in solidarity with the oppressed? Why are you here this morning? Why do you wish to walk this Way of Christ? I can certainly understand why many Christian groups through the ages have sought to escape the world and live apart from it.¹ But in the end that is not where the Way of Christ leads; it does not lead to separate communities and enclaves. Rather it leads to the kingdom of God breaking into the world.

Walking the Way of Christ means engaging with world in order to join in God's redemptive work in the world. It means calling out our broken systems of policing and our broken systems of justice. Walking the Way of Christ means calling for the recognition that all people, no matter their race, gender identity, sexual orientation, or anything else are made in the image of God; that all are worthy of being treated with dignity and respect. It means truly seeing, accepting, serving, and loving our neighbors.

Are we ready to walk this Way? Are we ready to do justice, even when it means standing between oppressor and oppressed? Or when it means

¹ E.g. the Anabaptists, Quakers, etc.

acknowledging our own participation in systems of oppression? Are we ready to love kindness, even when it means not seeking revenge or retribution? Or when it means pursuing reconciliation and rehabilitation rather than punishment? Are we ready to walk humbly with God, even when it means setting aside power and influence? Or when it means accepting the call to powerlessness and reliance upon God's providence?

The Way of Christ is hard. It will mean pain and suffering. But it is the only path to true life. It is the only path to true humanity. If for no other reason than it truly sees the humanity of all. Can you see the humanity in your neighbor? In a stranger? In your enemy? Are you willing to think differently knowing that it will mean seeing differently, feeling differently, and living differently? These are the questions of the Way of Christ. These are the teachings of the prophets and the Law. Dare we walk this foolish Way? Amen.