

Sermons from Parma Greece United Church of Christ

A PROSTITUTE AND THE CHURCH LADY

Easter - 7

June 2, 2019

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21/John 17:20-26

The Rev. R. Kurt Traugott

†††††

See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.'

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates.

'It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.'

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'

And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.'

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'

John 17:20-26

Phillip Yancey is a contemporary writer on spiritual themes. Two books I have read are "The Jesus I Never Knew" and "What's So Amazing About Grace?" At any rate I once heard him tell the story of a woman from his church in Chicago who had a conversation with a prostitute on a bus. As the woman of the street told her sad tale of running away from home, of sex and drug addiction, of being beaten up and pimped out by her man; the church lady listened quietly and then suggested gently that she go to church. The prostitute sputtered, "Good God, why would I want to do that? I already feel bad enough."

The message of the church is supposed to be “Come,” Anyone, everyone, here is the water of life. Come. Receive it as a gift. Unearned. Undeserved. Free. But somehow the prostitute on the bus heard a different message. “I already feel bad enough.” She apparently believes that if she goes to the church, she will hear bad news, not good. That she will find rejection, not acceptance. She will receive a sentence of death; not the water of life. This hurting woman on the bus is not alone in thinking this is what the church is about. She is not the only one who believes the message of the church is bad news, not good news.

In the book “UnChristian,” Barna Group researchers found that most young non-Christians perceive the church as hypocritical, insensitive and judgmental. One respondent put it like this: “Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peaceably with anyone who doesn’t believe what they believe.” Now before we get defensive, or start pointing fingers at other “brands” of Christianity as being the culprits here; it will be best if we took a good look in the mirror and asked ourselves a few questions first. I am the first to tell others what a welcoming parish we are...all are welcome and we are that in the big picture. What about the little things we think silently and keep in our hearts? Who do think they are sitting in my pew? And what about my parking spot, I mean.

Communications is a tricky business. Perhaps we are saying one thing and people are hearing something else. Though we may all be speaking English and in many cases with similar accents; it is entirely possible that we are, nonetheless, speaking different languages. Church speak is often more difficult to decipher than we on the inside think it is. That is why I print so much of the liturgy, so that those who visit can join us saying what is so familiar to us.

For example, in John’s Gospel, we read a part of Jesus’ prayer for one-ness, for unity. To us in the church it seems pretty simple and somewhat redundant on the surface. God and Jesus are one, Jesus and the disciples are one; therefore, we are one with each other and one with God; a great celebration of one-ness. Sounds good to us.

But to many others it is just gobbledygook. And also, it can be heard as a pretty serious and scary call for conformity; a message that one should lose one’s individuality in service of the community. People can hear these words as a condemnation of their ethnicity and their gender and their right to think for themselves. What are we in the church to do? It seems pretty obvious that we have to find a way to translate our message of hope and love and acceptance into language people unacquainted with church speak will be able to hear with understanding. This is difficult but not impossible.

The key is to stop thinking of God and Jesus and faith as somehow separate and “holy” parts of our lives and to think of them rather as being as natural as breathing and having dinner. If we can do this, we can then begin talking about them with the same simplicity as we talk about the dinner, we had last night or the movie we’re going to see tomorrow.

And then we must remember to talk about these things with the people in our lives who aren’t a part of the faith just as we would talk to our friends and neighbors and coworkers and relatives about where to go on vacation and about how our favorite sports teams are doing. The thing the church lady forgot in her encounter on the bus was that the prostitute did not need to go to church. In that moment, in that conversation, the church had come to the prostitute in the church lady.

In a sense, it is not so important that we get the world to come to the church, though that would be nice. Rather it to remember that the church is not a building,

the church is not the worship we share on Sunday morning. But that we are the church, each one of us, we are the Body of Christ, individually and collectively and our calling is to bring to the thirsty and the water of life together. Amen.