

Sermon – June 3 / John 3:1-17

“They’ll Know We Are Christians by ... ?”

We all know the hymn with the title of “They’ll Know We are Christians by Our Love.” We have sung that hymn many times – so gentle, so full of affirmation and good feelings. “They’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

It’s a hymn that tells us that we’re on the right path, that we’re doing **good** in the world. It gives us impetus to “keep it up,” to be those loving people that others will recognize as Christians in the world.

All that is wonderful, but I still have to ask, “Will they?” Will they know we are Christians by our love? Oh, I wish that were true – things would be much simpler if that were true.

Can you look at the way a person acts, and know by the way they act if that person is a Christian?

What are the telling characteristics that say **this** person is a Christian; **that** one is not? Are there telling characteristics, really?

To delve into that little bit, I’m going to check it out right here in this room with a test. I’m going to put your evaluation skills to work.

In order to do this, you will need to allow your mind to form a picture of what a Christian is. What does a Christian look like, act like, and say? You will need to evaluate a number of groups and determine which ones are actually more Christian, and which ones ... not so much.

You won’t have to respond out-loud to this. I need you to simply do this evaluation in your head and come up with your own answers.

Here’s a list of 8 groups, all in the United States. Think about each of them and determine which one of the 8 is the most Christian. And which one of the 8 is the least Christian.

Here’s the list: (the order is alphabetical)

- Assemblies of God
- Bible-believing Baptist Church (outside of Richmond)

- Branch Davidians (David Koresh, Waco)
- Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]
- Episcopal Church
- Mormon Church (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints)
- Roman Catholic Church
- United Church of Christ

Remember, you don't have time here to rank the whole list. Just decide which one is the most Christian, and which one is the least Christian.

Here's that list again:

- Assemblies of God
- Bible-believing Baptist Church
- Branch Davidians
- Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]
- Episcopal Church
- Mormon Church
- Roman Catholic Church
- United Church of Christ

Do you have them in mind? Are you able to evaluate them and find a most-Christian and a least-Christian in that list?

If you did – if you have groups in mind for the top and the bottom of that list – then you have some factor or factors that you used to evaluate the groups. You also have impressions of the groups in your head that you used to match against your picture of what it means to be more Christian.

If you've chosen the most and the least, you've also done it very quickly. I think, given more time, we might be able to put most or all of the groups into an ordered list of most-to-least Christian.

And yet, this also calls into question the factors we use to compare the groups. How is it we determine a group to be **very Christian**?

I am sure that, if you chose a group to be the least Christian on the whole list, and we took this list to a gathering of that particular group and asked them to rank the

same list, that their choices of who would be on the top and on the bottom would be very different. And they might well be at the top on theirs.

The factors that many of us would see as making a group more Christian could be very different from the factors that others would see as the true mark of a Christian.

...

This is a communion Sunday here at Church of the Covenant. Here, and at a great many churches, communion is held on the first Sunday of the month. In some Christian faith groups, the Eucharist is celebrated every Sunday. What we know, then, is that on this first Sunday of the month, people are observing the Lord's Supper at hundreds of thousands of churches all across the country.

At all of these churches, someone will present bread or a wafer, and will present juice or wine, and will recall the meal Jesus and the disciples shared just before Jesus was taken into custody and taken away, ultimately for execution.

In all of these churches, people reach out for communion with Jesus and with the Creator, with the disciples and believers across the generations, and with Christians all around the world. It is the Spirit of God that is with us all - and gives us a kind of unity.

All of us who share this communion call ourselves Christians. But what are the common factors of unity that extend into the living of our lives? What is it others could see in us and know we are Christian?

...

We don't even agree on the documents that are the authentic documents of our faith. That set of documents is known as "The Bible." And what makes up the Bible?

As Protestants, we are accustomed to the Bible being the large section: "The Old Testament" (or the Jewish writings,) and the smaller "New Testament," (or the Christian writings.) That's what it is.

But at home, I have a Bible made up of three sections. It has an additional section between the Old Testament and the New Testament. This is a collection called "The Apocrypha," a word from the Greek that means "those hidden away."

Interestingly, these books in the Apocrypha are included in the Bibles used in the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. These additional books are intermixed into the books of the Bible that we Protestants know. And yet, they are completely missing from the Protestant Bible. These are books that Protestants don't have an issue with – they just aren't considered part of the authentic canon of books that make up the Bible.

Last Wednesday, Joe Nelson hosted a session here on the King James Bible – the revolutionary effort of publishing the holy scriptures in English so the common English-speaking people could read it for themselves. This Bible changed the English-speaking world, introduced many phrases into common vernacular, and is charming and sometimes beautiful. On the other hand, it was the first draft of the Bible in English, and scores of new translations and re-writes have been printed since. The Gospel reading this morning is taken from the Common English Bible – a version released less than 2 years ago in Nashville.

The Bible is re-published in English over and over again, benefiting from new research and understanding, so that English-speaking people have maximum ability to understand it. And now we understand it perfectly, don't we? We all agree on what it says, don't we?

Okay, that's not true either. Christians disagree on the very book that we use as our guide.

...

Why would anyone name a church "Bible-believing Baptist Church?" They must have thought this church of theirs would be different – different because they actually believe and follow the Bible – while they are convinced others do not.

In the early centuries of the Christian Church, there were many, many more Christian texts circulating than ended up in any of these Bibles. Many of those texts survived and can be read today. There is even a "Gospel of Nicodemus" – who may be (I don't know) the Jewish leader who appears in today's Gospel reading. Eventually, in the early centuries of the church, scholars met and debated, and accepted some texts into the canon of the Bible, while rejecting many other writings before them at the time.

Whose Bible is "Holy" and whose is not? After attending seminary in Denver, Colorado, I was appointed to work at the seminary library as the Media Director. In the winter, I would ride the bus 7 miles from where we lived to the school. At the bus stop where I got on, several women who worked as maids also boarded the bus. They would get off in the Cherry Hills section, where they worked in the

fancy homes. One woman always carried her worn, leather-covered Bible. And she would often point out that hers was a King James Bible, which was – as it said on the cover – the “Holy Bible,” which she distinguished from other versions, which she considered, the Bible, but not “Holy.”

That distinction was not just hers – it extends to faith groups - to which version they will trust as the true word, and which they will not.

...

And then there’s the issue of how we understand what is written on the pages of the Bible – even if we use the same version, with the same books included.

What does the Bible say about slavery? Church leaders used to give slavery the seal of approval out of the pages of the Bible – it does seem to authorize slavery, but now we don’t approve of slavery, and we look at those texts differently.

What does the Bible say about marriage? People disagree, and they quote those texts that support their point of view, and consider other texts to be less important.

What does the Bible say about war? Again – what do we want it to say?

What does the Bible say about homosexuality? This is one of the major points of contention within American churches today.

A couple of weeks ago, a Baptist pastor in South Carolina preached from the pulpit that all the homosexuals in the United State should be divided into two groups: lesbians, and gay men. He said that two giant compounds of open land should be fenced in and the fence electrified. He said that all the lesbians should be put into one, and all the gay men into the other. We would air drop food to them, but otherwise, let them die out.

The news media descended on the town and talked to the church members, asking about their pastor. They said he is the most compassionate man they know. He is a strong Bible believer.

They’ll know he is a Christian by his love, by his love?

...

You’ve heard of the Rev. Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas. His congregation is composed primarily of his large, extended family. This is the church group that shows up and protests at funerals of soldiers who died in

Afghanistan and Iraq. Often, large groups of veterans on motorcycles show up before the service and block the Westboro Church protestors from the view of those at the service.

I've experienced the Westboro Church protests twice. Once was at a United Methodist church in Providence, Rhode Island, where I stood on the sidewalk, talking with the protestors and with the Providence cops assigned to keep the peace. I talked with Phelps's sons, corrections officers in Kansas, and with his granddaughters. The little girls walked up and down the sidewalk carrying signs that read, "Methodist Fag Church".

And I watched Fred Phelps and his group protesting at the United Methodist General Conference in Cleveland a few years ago. And, just a few weeks ago, they were back - at the United Methodist General Conference in Tampa, carrying signs that said, "Your Pastor is a Whore."

You can tell they are Christians by their love, by their love?

But I can tell you this ...despite their disturbing behavior, these groups are doing their best ... they believe in the Bible and they are convinced that they do what it says, and that they are the Christians they are called to be.

...

And then, there is the question of what the Bible is and where it came from:

- Is it the infallible word of God, dictated by God?
- Is the Bible inspired by God and written by those turning that inspiration into text?
- Is the Bible the best efforts of people of faith to provide wisdom and faith to future generations?

Depending on which Christians scholars you ask, the answer may be definite, but it will also definitely be different from one to another.

...

And, the last big difference for today ... What does Jesus look like? This may be the most telling factor of who we think is a Christian.

- Christians are like us.
- Jesus looks like us.

In early centuries, depictions of Jesus looked Middle-eastern. The Western world gave him a beard; long, straight hair; a European face; and light skin. That's the Jesus we know and love.

In Ethiopia, he looks Ethiopian; in Nigeria, Nigerian; in Japan, Japanese. Did you see the recent movie, "Red Tails?" One of the World War II, Tuskegee airmen had a depiction of "Black Jesus" taped onto the console in his fighter plane. That's the Jesus he knew and loved.

We tend to think a good Christian will look a lot like us. A good Christian will read our version of the Bible, will agree with our way of thinking, will do what we would do – at least, when we are doing our best.

...

Eventually, we may come to the conclusion that being a Christian doesn't mean much of anything specific - if all it takes is reading the Bible and following its words as we understand them.

There are all kinds of Christians. We can grow up wanting to be faithful, being involved in a faith community, reading the Bible, and striving to be good Christian – and still have a very, very different set of beliefs from so many others also calling themselves Christian.

...

No, there isn't a special mark that appears on a Christian's forehead. And there's no halo glowing over her head. And you can't actually tell a Christian by his love. This used to perplex my father. My father was active in the church, the Lions Club, and the Masons. He would come home from meetings and gatherings, walk into the house and put his hat up on the shelf in the closet, and sometimes he would turn and ask, "Why is it the best Christians I know are Jewish?"

My father had that feeling, from growing up in the Methodist Church, that "They'll know we are Christians by our love." And yet, so often when he saw the people doing the most to help others in need, those doing the acts of kindness were Jewish. In my father's experience, some of the most loving - weren't Christian.

Christians don't own the franchise on love. Sometimes others are better at it. But that doesn't diminish our own challenge to care for others out of love.

...

At some point, if we want to do our best as persons of faith, we need to stop worrying about everyone else's expectations. We already have guidance from our parents, our churches, our communities, our traditions, our leaders, our literature, and the messages of our culture.

While we can gather all of what we believe to be the best information and best guidance, at some point, we have to jump in and take an active part in the formation of our own faith. We need to be open to the Spirit of God speaking to us, and with us. We heard this morning from John's Gospel: "God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

At some point, it is up to us to tune out all the noise from the world around us and listen for that wind, that gentle push of God's spirit. This is part of what the Inward Journey is for... not just taking someone else's word on how you can be a person of faith. You absorb the wisdom and understanding available to you, and then you take it all on retreat - inside yourself.

Today, when you take the bread and the cup, you do so in unity with all of us here in this congregation this morning, with congregations of people across the country, and with Christians around the world. You, and we, and they - all open ourselves up to Jesus leading us to feel the Spirit of God.

And then it is up to each of us to find that place in ourselves where we can be open to God's Spirit.

God reaches out. You don't have watch for institutions and leaders to be your weathervanes to point the way. Feel the wind yourself.

The Spirit blows wherever it wishes. Feel the wind.

...

They'll know we are Christians if we tell them so.

But they will know **what kind of Christians we are**, by our love, by our love.