

- Pastor Keith Madsen
Sunday, 10/25/15

“Five Challenges: Keep the Focus on Jesus”

John 3:16-18

As I am approaching the time of my retirement, I am focusing my last ten sermons on the ten thoughts I want to leave this church. The first five are challenges which I want to lay before this church as you move forward, and the last five will be thoughts of comfort I want to encourage you with.

The last of my challenges is the most important of them all: *keep the focus on Jesus*. It’s not about this church. It’s not about me as the retiring pastor, or about the next pastor. It’s about Jesus and the way He came into this world to show God’s love and reconcile us to Him.

Of course, John 3:16 is perhaps the most loved Scripture in the Christian faith, and the reason is that it does a better job than any other passage of describing what we call the “gospel” or “good news” in as concise a manner as possible. For this reason, let’s look at it carefully.

First of all this passage tells us that God is one who loves us. There are even Christian leaders who have a difficult time believing this. In the earlier history of the United States there was a famous preacher named Jonathan Edwards who told people that God “abhorred” them and thought of them as vile insects to be dropped into a flame! However, such people miss the most central understanding of the Christian faith, as it is expressed in this passage – God loves us! The passage says more specifically that God loves “the world” by which the writer means “all the people in the world.” That is indeed good news! God does not love one people or culture better than any other people or culture. While it is certainly true that God has at various times developed special partnerships with different nations, such as with Israel through Jacob, this is not because he loves them more. God loves all the peoples he has created. When Abraham, the spiritual father of Jews, Muslims and Christians, was chosen by God, God said that he was chosen so that “in you *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3, NRSV.)

John 3:16 holds out a promise of eternal life to “*everyone* who believes in him.” Again, this does not differentiate between peoples. Nor does it differentiate between men and women! The Christian faith does not put women on a different plane than men when it comes to sharing heaven with God. For both men and women, the essential matter is belief, and the reward is eternal life. The Apostle Paul wrote, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, NRSV.)

Out of this love we have been considering, God gave us his Son. This belief is not like the old Greek or Roman perception that there are male and female gods and from their unions have come sons, or the idea that male gods have taken human female consorts and have produced offspring. We do not see Jesus as God’s Son in a biological sense. Nor do we see him as a second God.

With Judaism and Islam, Christianity proclaims that there is one God, and we owe our full allegiance to him. That Jesus is God's Son means that he comes from God and is the perfect image of who God is. All children in some way reflect their parents. We might say that a certain boy "has his father's eyes" or a certain girl "has her mother's disposition." These are imperfect reflections of their parents. But Christianity calls Jesus God's Son because he perfectly reflects his spiritual Parent. Hebrews 1:3 says of Jesus Christ, "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (NRSV.)

To say that "everyone who *believes in him*" will receive eternal life is to say more than that we should believe some intellectual concept about Jesus. Rather it means we should show the submission to him as God's Son and representative. It is also to say that we are called to trust that Jesus conveys to us God's grace. Grace means that God forgives and accepts us even though we sometimes fail and are less than perfect morally.

The reward for such trust in Jesus is eternal life. This does not mean we won't die physically. But rather it means that our spirit will live forever in fellowship with God. Verse 17 starts with a very essential statement: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Some people seem to think that God is looking for an opportunity to condemn everyone to hell. That is simply not the case! God is "pulling out all the stops" to save us all and bring us into fellowship with him. Verse 18, says that "those who do not believe are condemned already." In other words, it is our own destructive behavior that condemns us, not some arbitrary judgment of God.

So, all of this is why we want to keep the central focus of this church on Jesus. Focusing on human leaders brings with it human failing. Pastoral leaders who have been virtually deified, and then fallen flat on their face are Legion. And churches which get led away from the central focus of love and redemption for struggling people are also Legion.

This reminds me of a parable I have always enjoyed. It seems that on a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their life and money and effort for the support of the work. New boats were bought and new crews were trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely because they used it as sort of a club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club's decoration, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads

of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

It's so easy to get diverted from your reason to exist. To lose focus.

So, what do you do when you are focusing on Jesus as your reason for existence? Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Taking this a step further, 1 John 3:23 tells us, "And this is his commandment that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, *just as he has commanded us.*" Let me take the second part of that first – "love one another." Note it does *not* say, "love people in order to manipulate them to do what you want them to do." Nor does it say, "love people in order to get them to go to your church." Nor even, "love people so they will be converted." It just says, "love one another..." In Matthew 25:31-40, Jesus says that when we show people love through feeding them when they are hungry, or clothing them when they are going around in tatters, or visiting them when they are sick or in prison, it's like we are doing it to Jesus himself. So keeping the focus of this church on Jesus means showing love to the people around us through these kinds of actions.

But then there is also that first part of 1 John 3:23, "And this is the commandment that we should *believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ.*" And, of course, that is where we get back to the Scripture we started with for today, "For God so *loved* the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life." There are many loving things we are called to do for people, but the most loving of all is to help them find reconciliation with their God. There *are* many "lifesaving stations" in the cities of Issaquah and Sammamish, but people are still drowning. They are drowning in guilt and spiritual confusion. They are drowning in debt. They are drowning in loneliness. They are drowning in all the vagaries and calamities that life throws at us. They need a Savior. They need to be helped from following a path of destruction, despair and death, to finding *life*, life that is abundant and eternal.

My challenge to you is to keep this church a complete and true lifesaving station. Some might say in relation to helping people trust in Jesus Christ, "Well that is the preacher's job!" But that is only partially true. Certainly a preacher should preach and teach about Jesus Christ. But the reality is that in this church, as in many, most, if not all, people coming to church are already followers of Christ. Helping others to believe means two things: (1) *all* the members of this church need to bring in friends and acquaintances who need to learn more about Christ. Some of you have been doing that already, but all of us need to do it more. And (2) *all* the members of

this church need to take the gospel of Jesus Christ *out* to the world, helping people out there to know through our words and our deeds of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We don't need to memorize 4 spiritual laws or stock up on tracts or take some elaborate course in evangelism. We just need to share with the people we know how, as one of the songs we sung earlier proclaims, how Christ has touched *you* and made you whole.

I have full confidence that this church can meet this central challenge!