

Title: *Aggressive Christianity*

Text: Matthew 16:13-20

One of the trends that has emerged out of the last several election cycles in our country is the emergence of the so-called value voters. There is no doubt that our country is very bitterly polarized now. That coupled with politically correct understandings of what Christians should and shouldn't do means that we need to be all the more sensitive and precise in what we say and how we say.

Over the last several weeks, we've watched the political unrest in Egypt with great interest. President Mubarak has been a good ally of the United States in a lot of ways but his repressive tactics at home are catching up with him. Along with the demands for freedom and democracy, we have the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood and no one knows how it is all going to play out. Will Egypt somehow transform into a flourishing democracy or will it become another Islamist nation? We're concerned about that in part because there is remarkable diversity in Egypt and there is some freedom for Christians to practice their faith and to worship. Will something emerge there that will try to stamp out the church as evil men and oppressors have done throughout the centuries? Sometimes the Christian church gets accused of being oppressive.

Much has been made of a cultural divide between the blue states and the red states. One pundit has suggested that the so-called blue states which are aligned along the Northeast, the West Coast and the upper Midwest should secede from the union and join Canada and the the rest of the Red Sea of states could easily be called Jesus-land.

After the second election of President Bush in 2004, there was a piece on ABCNews.com which spoke about the anxiety of some about the influence of evangelical Christians on the election this year. Some people are exploring the possibility of moving abroad rather than staying in the United States.

One lady who said that she was considering leaving the country said her concern was more about the role Bush's religious beliefs seem to play in his governing, and the role of religion in American society — what she called “aggressive Christianity.”

“There is this aggressive morality that seems to me to have nothing to do with Christianity,” she said. “Our fathers were mostly Unitarians, not at all holy rollers.”

She believes there has been a closing of the American mind.

We can argue politics and that's not my intention this morning. We can lament that people have grave misconceptions about who evangelicals are. We can also affirm that you can be a God-fearing, Jesus-loving, Holy Spirit-filled, Christ-follower and vote Democrat or Republican.

What I was taken by though was the phrase, “aggressive Christianity”. There are several different ways to look at that. If aggressive Christianity means that we use the political process to try to get everyone to behave like a Christian, then that's bad. If it means though a type of

Christianity that is radical and is willing to follow Christ without any reservation, then I like the term *aggressive Christianity*.

We're talking these days about Jesus and the kingdom. We've said that in order for the kingdom to produce a super-abundant harvest, we need to soften the hard spots in our heart, move out the weeds, and clear out the rocks so that the seed, which is the word of God can find fertile soil in our heart.

We've also discovered that the kingdom may not at times be represented by the largest or most beautiful of plants, but it's intention is that all of the peoples of the world may find a place of refuge within its branches. It may start out small, almost imperceptible at times but it will grow and keep growing with a force all its own until God's reign is extended over all of creation.

Jesus has been teaching to the multitudes. We've looked at some of his teaching about the kingdom, but there are other teachings as well. People are beginning to take notice of him. We read through Matthew's gospel and we see stories of Jesus feeding 5000, healing people who touch him.

Matthew 15:29-31 says, "²⁹ Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. ³⁰ Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. ³¹ The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel."

After that, Jesus feeds 4000. There were a lot of questions in Jesus' day about whether or not he might be the Messiah. Crowds were drawn to him in amazement.

Even the religious leaders wanted to get their perception about Jesus straight. Matthew 16:1-4 says, "The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. ² He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' ³ and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ⁴ A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away.

It's after all of this that Jesus decides it's time to take his disciples away for some time together and he goes to the place Caesarea Philippi which is in the far north of Israel. It is near the city of Paneas which meant it was dedicated to the Greek god, Pan. It was a place where the influence of the Greeks and the Hebrews converged. Pagan shrines were everywhere. The very name of the city indicated that it was dedicated to the political powers of the day — Caesar and Philip.

In the Caesar, you have the power that will exalt itself against God as the governing power of the Empire. In Pan, you have a symbol of the kind of sensuality that lifts itself against the knowledge of God. In Jesus' day, we know that water gushed out from the cave there and it became the headwaters of the Jordan River. There were altars to Baal because the water brought

fertility and they thought that Baal was a fertility god.

In later days, they worshiped Pan with sexual rites that were offensive to anyone with any kind of sexual morality and ethics. The rabbis had a saying that when Messiah comes, the gates of Casearea Philippi would collapse. Another interesting point here is that these gates were also called “the gates of hades.”

It was when Jesus came into this region that he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” It’s the question that ultimately we all have to answer. It’s the question that will shape and determine our eternity. What do we make of Jesus — who do we say He is? There are any number of views that people have adopted. Some say he’s a good man who was as close to God as anyone ever was and if this world would only follow all of his good teaching, we’d be better off. Others say that there was something divine about him. Some say that eventually he became God when God’s spirit came upon him.

Jeremy Bowen, the presenter of a new British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary on Jesus stated, "The important thing is not what he was or what he wasn't — the important things is what people believe him to have been. A massive world wide religion, numbering more than two billion people follows his memory — that's pretty remarkable, 2,000 years on."

Bowen couldn't be more wrong. Who Jesus is and what he did is the foundation of our faith.

Just like there are debates about who Jesus is today, there were people in that day who weren't quite sure what to make of him. Some believed that he was John the Baptist come back to life. John was certainly a larger than life figure who had been imprisoned and put to death. His head was brought out on a platter to appease Salome. Someone with the incredible powers of Jesus just might be John the Baptist come back to life.

There was tradition that the Messiah would be one who came in the spirit and the power and in the tradition of Elijah. Before you turn the page to Matthew you read the last words of the Old Testament from Malachi which say, “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

Some thought he may have been just like one of the other prophets of old. This in and of itself would have been exciting to the people of Jesus' day because this came at the end of what is known as 400 silent years in regard to prophecy. These were intriguing suggestions and it may even have made for interesting fodder for discussion by the disciples as they walked along the way and contemplated this remarkable man before them. Perhaps they would overhear people in the multitudes that were listening to Jesus teach and wonder, “Who is this Jesus really?” Perhaps they'd hear someone make a comment or ask a question and that would spark a debate among themselves as to who Jesus really is.

The disciples, though, had a different view of Jesus. They had the rest of the story. I don't

know exactly what Jesus told the disciples in private that he didn't tell the multitudes. They could use the reaction of the multitudes as a counterpoint or point of comparison as to who they had seen Jesus to be. So Jesus asks the question, "What about you. Who do you say I am?"

Peter voiced what all of them had come to realize. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Peter gave the correct formulation of who Jesus really is. He is the Christ. He is the Messiah of God. He is the anointed one. Christ is a proper title. It is not simply Jesus' last name.

Peter got it right, don't you know. Peter who is so often criticized for saying the wrong thing and doing the wrong thing had enough spiritual insight to grasp that Jesus. In fact, Jesus said, "Simon, flesh and blood hasn't given this information to you. You are able to understand this because my Father has made it known to you. And Jesus says to wishy-washy Simon Peter, the one who is so often so wrong but has such a right heart, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not overcome it."

There are several points here that are significant. One is that someone like Simon Peter could be used to make such a confession. One writer recounts the following story. I received this brief autobiography from a seminary student six years ago:

For the record, I am 45 years old, three times divorced, four times married, a convicted felon, (homicide,) a biker and a former businessman. I struggled for nearly fifteen years with my sense of call, asking what congregation in their right mind would call ME as a pastor. The answer from a pastor friend of mine, (Assembly of God,) that the ONLY kind of church that would call me would be one that had real sinners in it, people with real problems who wanted to see the Lord at work in the lives of real people. In other words, the Body of Christ. I liked his answer.

I like his answer, too. We might ask: "What congregation in their right mind would want Peter as their pastor?" Most of the time when he spoke, he said the wrong things. Jesus even called him "Satan!" He publicly denied knowing Jesus three times. Yet, he is the foundation Jesus is building his church on. Couldn't Jesus have picked someone better -- like pious me? You see, Jesus will use ordinary people so that ordinary people will know that He uses ordinary people, flaws, warts, and all.

God uses Peter to voice the confession and it is the confession of the Lordship of Christ that Jesus will use to build his church. When we give voice to the confession, "Jesus is Lord" and we put feet to that confession and we become a group of people aggressively following after Jesus, we become an unstoppable force.

Maybe you've heard this before but it bears repeating. We read that verse and it says, "The gates of Hell will not prevail against it or overcome it and we have the posture of Hell on the attack coming after the church. The actual fact is that the image is that of the church on the move, storming the gates of hell going to that very place that the devil has by the throat and saying in the name of Jesus Christ there is deliverance and power and forgiveness and life. When

we're armed with his spirit and we do that, we cannot be defeated.

That's part of what Jesus means when he says that the keys of the kingdom are given to us and whatever we loose will be loosed and whatever we bind will be bound. The local church is the hope of the world. It's our job to introduce people into this kingdom. As we preach the gospel and they repent, their sins are loose. As they reject it, their rejection is a judgment against them.

The same writer I quoted a while ago said, "Often in the midst of church conflicts, we may not always believe these words of Jesus; but sometimes we may need to check if the congregation is still a group that has been built by Jesus upon and with sinful human beings who have been grasped by God's revelation concerning the truth about Jesus?"

The strength of the church is not the stability of its people and their faith (e.g., Peter), but the trust we sinners have in the all-powerful God. Neither death nor the powers of evil can over-power this.

If the church were to lose its hierarchy, its clergy, its vast collection of buildings, its stores of learning amassed over the centuries, even the text of its sacred books, and had to face the world with nothing but the living presence of the Risen Jesus and its mission to proclaim the Good News to all nations and people, it would be no less a church than the church of Peter and Paul was. Perhaps it might be more of a church than it is now.

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