

21 March 2011

Take Two

The following is called a Take Two. It is an attempt to expand on some of the things that happened during recent Sunday sermons. That's it.

But, the most interesting sermons are often those that happen in the minds of people in the congregation. So, feel free to respond to this email as you see fit.

Dear Friends (Known and Unknown),

Why does the church exist?

It is really an open question, I think. And, full disclosure, I say that as someone who wasn't really raised in the church. After all, there are lots of vaguely nice people in the world. Lots of fine charities. More than enough ways to spend our time. Why bother? Lots of smart folks bother with the church, but lots of other smart people don't.

It seems to me that when Jesus started calling people to follow him, he had specifics in mind. He was calling us to be open to him and live with him. He was calling us to learn what life and God were really about from him. He was calling us to spread his presence to others as a sign God's love was really invading the beautiful and bloody earth. If we take the time to meditate on that, it is really quite shocking. Being church is more than being vaguely nice.

The last three sermons were titled Reaching Up, Reaching In, and Reaching Out. When we look at Scripture and history (Acts 1-3, for instance), these three movements really seem to be at the heart of what Christians tend to do when Jesus calls them. So, they are what we tend to do to make ourselves more available to God and better able to represent Jesus in the world.

A way to physically remember them is to press your palms together as in prayer (Reaching Up), then fold them out with the pinkies touching as in reading a book (Reaching In), and finally separating those hands and extending them apart and out (Reaching Out).

You can name them different things – perhaps Communion, Community, and Compassion. Or, I had a colleague who called them Know, Grow, and Go. But, they come up over and over again.

In essence, Reaching Up has to do with all that goes into what happens when Christians gather together to worship God in the name of Jesus Christ. Usually this is a large event, but not always. It often has to do with what happens in the Worship Sanctuary on Sunday, but it connects with other gatherings as well.

It is not just about technique. (Did the Choir sing well or sound flat? Did the preacher "bring it" or put us to sleep?) It is also about focus. (Did we focus on God or somewhere else?) And disposition. (Are we really open to meeting God or just going through the motions?)

Reaching In focuses on what is typically a smaller group habit. Here people open up over time to a few other Christians in order to deepen their understanding of the Christian faith, to ask questions and seek answers, to learn how to pray, and to supporting one another in times of both laughter and tears. It also often involves fellowship in the typical sense of “fun”.

Reaching Out happens in all sorts of ways – big and small, individual or congregation-wide. But in all cases it is motivated by a few rock-solid convictions: 1) God is really graceful. So, we freely receive blessings from God so we can bless others in God’s name. 2) God in Christ loves the whole world and not just a part of it called “church”. 3) We are each given the power by the Holy Spirit to represent Jesus and carry on his ministry. As we reach out we share our resources radically with others as a sign of God’s radical love. And as we reach out we invite others to follow Jesus for themselves.

Think about it for a second. Name a specific ministry or program of the congregation and I wager it will fall pretty clearly into at least one of these: Reaching Up, Reaching In, or Reaching Out. (If it doesn’t, then what is its purpose?)

Or, to put it another way, when someone asks, “What do Christians do?” this is a pretty good model: We worship; We grow to better understand God and better support each other; and we ask what we’ve been given by Christ to share with those around us, especially the most vulnerable.

To these we would add a fourth. Let’s call it Reaching Under. Basically, Reaching Under has to do with issues involving staffing, buildings and maintenance, and balancing the schedules and needs of different ministry groups.

Reaching Under helps make space for the other three movements to happen. It is essential, but when it takes over and becomes an end in itself, a congregation tends to be in trouble.

Under the direction of Christ, as clergy we humbly seek to help guide, explore, and refine these movements alongside the people of the congregation. As clergy we believe we are a significant part of the mix in many ways. But, we believe the Apostle Paul when he says the church is a body in which all are called to be creative, contributing members.

Building on that last sentence, I’d ask every person reading this who considers himself or herself connected to Jesus Kingwood Christian Church to consider the following types of questions (and as a member of KWCC, I ask them of myself as well):

Can I make worship with the community on Sundays a habit and a priority that trumps almost all others for that space in my schedule?

What would it look like if I met periodically with some other Christians just to ask questions about our faith, speak honestly about our lives, and pray for one another? How could I help make that happen?

What issues and people in need (spiritual and/or physical) keep me up at night? How can I share with extravagance the gifts I’ve been given to touch that need?

There are a lot of valuable and sometimes unspoken questions congregations and clergy ask: How do we get more people in the seats on Sunday? How do we get “fresh blood” into the congregation? How do we get people in the wider community to like us?

Before we mess with questions like those, let’s dwell on these a while.

Peace in Christ,

Robert