

# THE JESUS CENTERED COMMUNITY

## Acts 2:38

### The Third Sunday after Epiphany

It is an old story. It could even be said that it is a worn out story. But, sometimes old and worn out stories need re-telling from time to time. Perhaps, they become old and worn out because they communicate something that is timeless and important. So, you have probably heard the story about the group of folks up on the New England coast who became concerned about the frequent shipwrecks near the place they lived. When ships floundered on nearby rocks, this group rowed their lifeboat out into the treacherous waters to rescue sailors from drowning. Many were saved on that dangerous coast by the courage of these men.

As time went on the group decided to get a bigger boat and then to build a rescue station. This would provide a place for the boat and a place to bring those who were rescued. At first it was a sparse single room with cots, fireplace, and stove. However, at time went on and the reputation of this group grew, they added more space and more comforts so that the members of the rescue team could gather there between rescues. The members also became more cautious. Sometimes they even decided to sit out a storm because it was too dangerous. Finally, no one went out from the rescue station into any storms. Storms still came. People were still in danger and many were lost. But, the rescue station was no longer in the rescue business. It was a gathering place, a haven, for old men to gather and talk about the great days when they went out into the dangerous waters to save the lives of lost sailors.

As we sit comfortably inside the church, we cannot miss the point of the old worn out story of the rescue station. The painful truth is the church of our day has become too much like a haven for us to gather and talk about the days of past glory. John Wesley, the 18<sup>th</sup> century father of Methodism, once said, "Give me 100 men who hate sin and love Jesus Christ, and all of England will be shaken for God." The church in our day has lost more than members, it has lost the vision of Wesley for the world.

Our text from the book of Acts is the ending of the Day of Pentecost. The entire second chapter of Acts deals with this powerful event. The Holy Spirit came into the presence of the gathered believers in such a way that the room was filled with the sound of a violent rushing wind. Tongues of fire appeared to rest over the head of each person present and the Spirit gave them abilities to speak in a language other than their own so that everyone in the city could hear about Jesus in their own language. While everyone was doing their share of speaking, it is Peter's preaching that is remembered in the story of the Day of Pentecost. His sermon was all about Jesus. When the people heard it, they asked,

What should we do?

(Acts 2:37)

In verse 38 of that 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts we hear Peter's response.

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of

Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It sounds much like the story of the Philippian jailer whose story is told in the last half of the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts. In that story we see Paul and Silas in jail. The time is about midnight. All during the evening they had been praying and singing hymns to God. In words that remind us of the Day of Pentecost the scripture speaks of an earthquake so violent that the prison doors were shaken off hinges and chains were broken. Thinking that all his prisoners had surely escaped, the jailer was about to kill himself, but Paul cried out,

Do not harm yourself, for we are all here. (Acts 16:28)

It was an unbelievable moment for this jailer. It was not just the ground beneath his feet which was shaken, but the ground within his heart.

What must I do to be saved? (Acts 16:30)

he asked them. As we paraphrase his question we hear, “What must I do to be as you? What must I do to be able to face life threatening circumstances as you face them?” We know Paul’s answer. It has passed through the centuries as one of those hallmark verses of the faith.

Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. (Acts 16:31)

Whether we are hearing Peter in Jerusalem or Paul in Philippi, the answer is still the same, “It is all about Jesus.”

Here is the thing proclaimed at the beginning. Here is what must not be forgotten in our day. Here is what must once again be lifted up as the central truth of the church. The church truly centered on Jesus is passionate about Jesus. Being passionate about Jesus is not something which can be done from a passive position. It requires us to take seriously how we are to live as a disciple of Jesus. It means that there are some things we cannot do and there are some things we must do. It means that we will not be ashamed of the gospel, nor our loyalty to it and the Christ who set it in motion. Being a Jesus centered church means that we understand the important people are not the people inside the church, but those outside of it. Instead of being content with the circle of the saved around us, we will find ourselves constantly searching for ways to enlarge that circle so that more and more people can experience the reality of Jesus in their lives. In a Jesus centered church those within are always facing outside toward those who do not yet understand that Jesus died for them. There is no other position for us to stand if we take seriously this word of Jesus which says,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.  
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them  
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy  
Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have  
commanded you. (Matthew 28:18-20)

In a Jesus centered community it is a natural thing to carry the message of Jesus into every place He puts us. The question is not, "Should I?" but "How can I share Christ where I live and work and play?" In a Jesus centered community of faith sharing Christ is not the work of a few but the mission of everyone who has been touched by the baptismal waters.

And it is also true that in a Jesus centered church, people live differently with one another. An ancient story called "The Rabbi's Gift" points us to the way people in a Jesus centered church live together. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the order of monks which had flourished for over two hundred years had come to the place where there were only five monks living in the monastery and all of them were over 70 years of age. From time to time the aging abbot or leader of the monastery would visit a Jewish rabbi who lived in a hut in the nearby woods. When the Catholic monk asked his friend if he had any advice which might save his order, the rabbi would say, "I know how it is. The Spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in the town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So, the two old men wept and prayed and read scripture together. Upon his departure the old monk asked once again, "Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order." "I am sorry," said the rabbi. "The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, he told the other four brothers the cryptic words of the rabbi. It set them to thinking. "Ah, the Messiah is one of us. Could it be the Abbot? Could it be Brother Thomas? He is a holy man. It couldn't be Brother Elred, could it? He is such a crotchety old man! No, it couldn't be Brother Philip. He is a nobody. Or, do you suppose I am the Messiah? Oh, God, please not me." As each monk contemplated in this manner, each started treating each other with extraordinary respect as one might indeed treat the Messiah. And, each also began regarding himself differently in case he might indeed be the chosen one. The spirit of the old monks changed. Visitors who came, returned. When they returned, they brought their friends. After awhile visiting younger monks came asking if they could join the order. Soon the rabbi's gift had created a vibrant center of light in what had been a dark place.

In a Jesus centered community we will treat one another as if each was the person of Jesus before us. When that begins to happen, people will come to see. They will come not to see us, but the One who has caused such a difference in the life of community known as the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on September 21, 2006.