



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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What Are We Doing?

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it give light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

I've been a minister for about 40 years, depending on how you count. Some of you know that I'm congenitally half Methodist and half Presbyterian. I was born into my father's Presbyterian church and baptized by a man who, the following year, became president of Pittsburgh Seminary. When I was three we moved to my mother's town and her Methodist church a couple miles up the Monongahela River, and I was raised in the United Methodist Church. In those days, the Methodists had a two-stage ordination process, so if you count from the first stage, I've been ordained 41 years, and if you count from the second it's been 38 years. Either way, it's a big number.

I tell you this by way of saying that I've been active in the church for a long time, and over the years I've always asked myself, and occasionally asked other members, "What are we doing here? What are we doing in church? Why are we here?"

The answers, of course, have varied with individuals, and it doesn't matter whether we're talking about Methodists or Presbyterians or any other denomination.

For some of us, the answer is that we've come to love Jesus, in our own halting, imperfect way, and though we're not very good at it, we really want to live as he would have us live. We say, in the words of the folksy old hymn, "I have decided to

follow Jesus; no turning back, no turning back.”

For some others, the answer is that they've been thinking about following Jesus, but they want to know more about him, and what it means to be his disciple. They want to count the cost of discipleship before they decide to enlist, which Jesus himself says is a wise thing to do, if you take the idea of following him seriously. He says things like “Take up your cross and follow me,” and if you suspect that he might be talking, even metaphorically, about the big, heavy, splintery kind of cross, and not just the pretty little jewelry kind, then any reasonable person would want to think about that before they signed on to Christianity.

Jesus has a very good reputation. Almost everybody likes Jesus, even if they're not so happy with some of the company he keeps. That was true from the beginning, when scribes and Pharisees gave him grief for hanging around with sinners and tax collectors. And it's been true ever since, as some who claimed to follow Jesus engaged in crusades and inquisitions, and perpetuated slavery and racism, and belonged to organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi Party. That gives lots of thoughtful people pause. How can Christianity be any good if Christians can be so bad? For that matter, some people aren't happy that Jesus' followers don't consistently fit into worldly labels like “conservative” or “liberal,” if those are the kinds of categories that matter most to them.

Jesus has been associated with all sorts of human ugliness that comes from sin-sick souls, but in a sense that's precisely the point. “Those who are well have no need of a physician,” Jesus says, though I'm pretty sure he means it ironically, since, if we see our souls honestly, we know that none of us is all that healthy. “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost,” he reminds us. Lots of us realize that

we've been lost, too, and needed to be found, instead of imagining that we were among the righteous all along.

Some people come to church because they love Jesus and want to follow him, while others come because they're trying to decide but still have their reservations. Yet others come for reasons that have little to do with following Jesus. Some show up in church because their mom made them when they were young, and all these years later it's more like a habit than a matter of devotion. People used to come to church, in the decades right after World War II, in part because everybody else was doing it. If you plot attendance as a percentage of membership here, it's actually higher now than it was through the early 1970s, which probably means that not as many people come today out of mere social pressure. That may be just as well.

Whatever the reasons for coming, some people have always taken what we say and do in church more seriously than others, in terms of the way they live. For many, the words and ways of Jesus are altogether compelling, and they can almost feel the Holy Spirit working to make them a new creation, little by little, day by day. For others, coming to church seems more like tuning in to a favorite television show: they enjoy it well enough, and try not to miss it, but the experience has little to do with shaping the rest of their lives.

Jesus wants people to follow him, not just admire him, and still less to be merely entertained by him. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven," he says, "but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven." For those who love Jesus, or at least *want* to love him, that's not so much a question of "How many peas do I have to eat to get dessert?" as a reminder that Christianity is fundamentally a way of life, not just a set of religious opinions.

“Faith without works is dead,” as the New Testament letter of James says, and for all we know, this particular James may have been the brother who grew up with Jesus himself.

Jesus tells his disciples, “You are the light of the world.” A wildly implausible claim like that, with its awesome burden of responsibility, would send us all scrambling for bushel baskets to hide under, were it not for the fact that the light in our case is just a kind of reflected light. Any light that comes from us comes first of all from Jesus. We are moons, not suns, and our light is a reflection of the Son of God. But, as with the moon that circles the earth, more or less light can come from us, depending on how we align ourselves with the source. A full moon, after all, reflects so much light that people can see to walk by it, even in the middle of the night.

The letters of the early church tell us what it means to be the light of the world, to align ourselves with Jesus so that the world can see to walk by his light reflected in our lives. They say, for example, “Be at peace among yourselves,” because this fractious, tribal world desperately needs a foretaste of the peaceable kingdom. Be patient with one another, and encourage one another, because we all need courage, and it takes time and patience for most of us to acquire it.

Don’t repay evil for evil. That may be the way of the world, and our own natural inclination, but spiritual people rise above nature and redirect its energies, the way wind and water can be redirected for other purposes. Always do good to one another, then, and do good to everyone else. Pay no attention to cynics who talk as though doing good was something to be scorned. They only say that by way of masking their own complacency and self-centeredness. Test everything, and you’ll be able to discern the spirits around you the way you can

tell the types of trees, by the fruits they produce.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus says, switching metaphors, and no church worth its salt ignores the social implications of the gospel as well as its personal implications. Jesus takes on apathetic religious folk when he says, “Woe to you, hypocrites. You tithe dill and mint and cumin but neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” Justice, of course, is an inherently social concern. It looks beyond charity, even when charity is necessary, and asks why people should need charity at all. What is it about the structure of society that leaves people stuck in poverty and other hardships, in spite of their own best efforts? What would Jesus do about that, and what should Jesus’ disciples do, if we were really to reflect the light of Christ’s love in the world?

The church is about all these things: every form of spiritual growth within us, and every need we can meet beyond ourselves. If the church should ever fail to be about all of this, it might continue as some sort of social club, but it would no longer be the church of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, the salt of the earth.

Our Forward in Faith campaign is about equipping the church to be the church, now and into the future. We need to fix up the physical plant, because some of the light of Christ shines in and through this place, where so many people meet to worship and learn and grow ready to serve.

At least a tithe of the campaign, from the very first dollar, will go directly to mission, because reaching out to others in the love of Christ is central to who we are and what we’re about. Westminster was a founder, and remains a principle supporter, of the South Hills Interfaith Movement, now celebrating its fiftieth year. We’re a leading contributor to City Mission, helping

people get back on their feet and lead productive lives. We support ministries in Homewood and the Hill District, working to improve people's lives and breaking down barriers of race and class. We built a school in Haiti where a thousand children attend every day, and we support an orphanage in Malawi and health care and Christian witness in India. We also teach our children here about mission and service through the Pocket Change Project and Rise Against Hunger, where whole families work together in our gym to package 40,000 meals in a single day.

If we take care of our building and grounds through this campaign, most of the church's endowment proceeds will fund new initiatives in mission, because none of the endowment's resources go to our regular operations. It's not either/or between property and mission here, but both/and. Attention to one lays a foundation for the other.

We do all these things for the present and for the future. The Bible reminds us how vital it is to tell new generations what God has done, and what they can expect God to do, if they learn to love God and serve God faithfully. People can't learn these things unless we tell them the truth of God's Word, and show them the power of that truth in the way we live.

We've come this far by the grace of God, and we go forward in faith, because that's just who we are. It's what we're doing here. That's what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in the world today, and always.



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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org