

Showing the Signs of Love

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
April 8, 2018—Second Sunday of Easter

- John 20:19-31 (Good News Translation) ²⁴ One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (called the Twin), was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” Thomas said to them, “Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”
- 1 John 1:5-2:2 (Good News Translation) ⁵ Now the message that we have heard from his Son and announce is this: God is light, and there is no darkness at all in him. ⁶ If, then, we say that we have fellowship with him, yet at the same time live in the darkness, we are lying both in our words and in our actions. ⁷ But if we live in the light—just as he is in the light—then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us. ⁹ But if we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make a liar out of God, and his word is not in us. ²¹ I am writing this to you, my children, so that you will not sin; but if anyone does sin, we have someone who pleads with the Father on our behalf—Jesus Christ, the righteous one. ² And Christ himself is the means by which our sins are forgiven, and not our sins only, but also the sins of everyone.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: The world looks to our words and deeds for reason to believe in Christ.

Mary and I have a friend—I’ll call her “Pauline”—who is a musician. At least, that’s what comes to mind when I first think of her. Now Pauline also happens to be one of New England’s leading psychiatrists for people with eating disorders. But during our college years when Mary and I were singing with her in the Wooster Chorus, Pauline was an underclassman with a lovely soprano voice who also happened to play the classical harp. She was the only college freshman I knew who had her own station wagon because, after all, you can’t use a moped or a VW “Bug” to haul a harp to a gig, now can you? Pauline grew up in Springfield, Missouri. She was actively involved in the worship, music program, and youth group of a Presbyterian church there—perhaps the same one our mission trip stayed in about 15 years ago.

We’ve kept in touch with Pauline because of reunions of the Wooster Chorus and now because of Facebook. Last summer we got to have breakfast with Pauline and her husband at their century home in Portland, Maine. Still as spunky as she was at age 18. Pair her with my wife and you’ve got two of the most compassionate people I know.

Mary and I love Pauline. I also hurt for Pauline. She’s lost her ability to trust the church. Not her congregation. Not the Presbyterian Church (USA). Just as Pilate washed his hands of the whole “sentencing of Jesus” ordeal, Pauline has washed her hands of the Christian church. For now, at least, according to a chat I had with her.

Why? Because the Christian faith that catches her eye doesn’t seem to be in line with the spirit of compassion, generosity and trust that Jesus preached and practiced.

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Today’s gospel lesson takes place over the space of eight days. The first part of the story occurred on the evening of that first Easter, the second part a week later. Ten of the apostles were holed up somewhere in Jerusalem, behind locked doors, afraid that the mob or the military might be coming for them the way they had for Jesus. There in that locked hideout, suddenly and without warning, the resurrected Jesus was standing in their midst, and the disciples’

astonishment was soon replaced by joy – seeing their master and teacher alive again! After some time, Jesus departed as mystically as he had arrived.

I said “ten of the apostles” because Judas was not there, of course. Also, the disciple Thomas was not present – we don’t know where he was, or why he wasn’t there. When he did rejoin his friends they were all, “We saw the Lord, Thomas!” and “Oh, you missed it, Thomas!” and “You snooze, you lose, Thomas!”

“Nope,” he responded. “Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”¹ And ever since then we have known that disciple as... “Doubting Thomas.”

But according to Diane Roth, a Lutheran pastor in Texas writing for *Christian Century* magazine, while the nickname “doubting Thomas” has stuck,

...it is not really accurate. There is a Greek word for doubt, and John does not use it. He uses the word *apistos*, or “faithless.” Thomas is not a doubter; he is faithless. He says it himself, in front of the other disciples. He doesn’t say, “I doubt it.” He says, “I will not believe” – unless I see.²

So “Doubting Thomas” is really “faithless Thomas.” He won’t believe unless his physical senses confirm what his heart and mind struggle to comprehend. In this way Thomas reminds me of our friend Pauline. She’s not “Doubting Pauline” because she doesn’t have her hesitations about Christianity. No, like the disciple she is “faithless Pauline” because based on what she has heard being said, based on what she has seen being done (or not done) “in the name of Christianity” she hasn’t seen signs of the church embodying Christ’s love.

Now, I told Pauline that she’s applying to the whole church the faults of some. It’s like a Facebook post yesterday accusing all Ohioans of being racist because two thoughtless baseball fans mocked and taunted people demonstrating outside Progressive Field advocating for Native American rights. While the two fans were rude and crude in their behavior, there were 35,000 other fans who were not. In effect, that’s what I told Pauline – don’t condemn the church because of what you see from a few supposed church-goers. Nevertheless, the reality is that the faults of some Christians-in-name-only do, indeed, fly in the face of what Jesus showed us and taught us. Let me suggest four examples.

- First, science has proven that addiction to a chemical is a disease of the brain, and yet too many Christians condemn the sick person as though they willfully sought to contract the disease.
- Second, while invoking words and symbols of the Christian faith, white supremacists denigrate the very humanity of people with dark-toned skin; and yet it’s ironic that many of them or their wives or girlfriends go to a lot of trouble and expense at the beach or tanning salons to achieve fashionable tans by darkening their own skin.
- Third, Jesus showed loving acceptance for every person – even praying for the people who brought about his death – and yet some so-called Christians routinely ignore Jesus’ teaching and the very example of his life. Some Christians ridicule people whose innate biological gender identity doesn’t conform to typical female-male types. Perhaps the most graphic and disturbing example is one that I dare say all of us have seen: the members of infamous Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, in their senseless strategy to condemn non-typical gender identity,

¹ John 20:25b Good News Translation

² “Sunday’s Coming: Showing the world our wounds” by Diane Roth in *The Christian Century* at newsletter@christiancentury.org accessed 4/2/2018

- randomly and viciously taunt grieving military families at the funerals of their fallen loved one.
- And fourth, one of the realities of the world throughout history is that there have always been people seeking refuge from dangerous and oppressive places.
 - In the Old Testament, Jacob and his sons were refugees. And you may have heard of some famous refugees mentioned in the New Testament: Joseph and Mary and their child Jesus.
 - In 1939 our own supposed “Judeo-Christian nation” would not admit a ship bearing 900 Jewish refugees. The United States government sent the steamship St. Louis back to Europe. The tragic consequence was that nearly 30% of its passengers were known to have died in the Holocaust.³
 - And about 1.5 million people whose heritage is in Palestine have been living as refugees in more than fifty refugee camps in their own land for generations.

And yet people claiming to have Christ in their hearts would close their hearts to the desperate plight of refugees?

Now it’s absolutely true that most Christians don’t speak or act in ways so contrary to the life and teachings of Jesus. But see how we’re being painted with the same broad brush strokes because of that *supposed* Christian minority whose words and deeds ignore or even contradict the example of Jesus? As Christians that makes our role in the world harder... and all the more urgent.

“Perhaps it sounds naïve to our ears, but when we can no longer see Jesus, when those around us can no longer see Jesus, they are looking for him in our lives. They are looking for him in communities of faith that care for those who are needy, that sacrifice rather than hoard, that include rather than exclude, that listen before speaking. They are looking for us to hold out our hands to see if we have wounds. Jesus holds out his wounded hands to Thomas, the proof that his love and suffering are real – that he is the same man who was crucified. Maybe that is what the world is asking from us: to see what we are willing to risk for the sake of love, for the sake of one who loves us.”⁴

Pauline wants to see the church of Jesus Christ act like Jesus Christ. I daresay so do we.

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³ “Refugees—Key Facts,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005139>, accessed 4/3/2018

⁴ Diane Roth, “Sunday’s Coming...”