

“Only Jesus”

The church has been in the headlines
A lot these past days and weeks.

A list of Catholic priests
Who have a history of sexual abuse
Was made public
In the two Catholic dioceses of Virginia.

The Southern Baptist Convention
Has released a report of sexual abuse
Among its church leaders.

And just this past week the United Methodist Church
The third largest religious American organization
Behind the Catholic Church and the SBC . . .

Is possibly headed towards a schism
Following a church-wide vote

That embraces a more traditional view of human sexuality.

Along with these headlines
Most mainline denominations
Have experienced division along these lines:

- Theological understanding of human sexuality
- The authority of the Bible
- Christian faith and today’s divisive politics.

The Church of the Brethren is not without
These same polarizing issues.

“Only Jesus”

The Brethren have initiated another conversation
Focusing on a “compelling vision”
That seeks to unite the church.

Let’s face it, the church as an institution
Is crumbling under its own weight!

And I’m not sure whether to give it a proper burial
Or pray for its redemption and resurrection!

~~

I read an article this past week from Baptist Global News.

It reads, “Proselytizing has taken a beating in recent decades as the number of religiously affiliated Americans has plummeted.”

“Millennials are taking it a step further, telling Barna researchers it is inappropriate to attempt to evangelize others.”

“That attitude is prevalent in about 47 percent of that generation, Barna said in a survey released earlier this month.”

“Almost half of Millennials agree at least somewhat that it is wrong to share one’s personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith,” Barna said in an online summary of the survey.”

Has the church lost its bearings in the storms of life?

I pray our passage today can help to enlighten us.

~~

“Only Jesus”

In the Christian calendar

We have come to the end of the Season of Epiphany.

The Season of Epiphany is bookended between two events.

Epiphany and Transfiguration Sundays.

The first, Epiphany Sunday, takes place on January 6.

And celebrates the day

The Magi came and worshiped Jesus.

The second, Transfiguration Sunday, recognizes the day

Three disciples witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration.

The church considers both days as epiphanies,

Events that reveals something of God.

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It happened on a day

Jesus felt the need to pray.

He went up on a mountaintop

Along with his close disciples

Peter, James, and John.

There they saw him transfigured . . .

His face lit with brilliant radiance

His clothes emanating a dazzling light.

Two men appear with Jesus.

The disciples recognized them as Moses and Elijah.

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And as Moses, Elijah, and Jesus were talking
Peter interrupts them,

“It is good to be here.
Let’s build three tents to mark the occasion.”

But as Peter was making his comments
A voice from Heaven interjects, saying

“This is my beloved Son,
With whom I am well-pleased, listen to him.”

As God is speaking
A cloud descends upon them,
Causing the disciples to become afraid.

But Jesus comes to them and tells them to get up.

And as they looked, the cloud lifts
Revealing no one but Jesus.

~~

This is an event full of symbolism.

Moses is there representing the Law!

It was he who, with his own face full of radiance,
Brings down the Commandments from Mt Sinai.

The Law are the words of God found in the Torah
The first five books of our Old Testament.

“Only Jesus”

The Law teaches the way of obedience to God.

Elijah is there, the greatest of all the prophets.

The prophets' role in the OT

Was to call continually the people back to God.

The two of them, Moses and Elijah

Symbolizes God's old covenant,

The Law and the Prophets!

The cloud descends on all of them.

And when it became clear, Jesus is standing alone.

The symbolism of the transfiguration event

Affirms the centrality of Jesus to our faith.

~~

Our adult Sunday school class

Has been studying the history of Christian theology.

It is an interesting study

Focusing on the progression of thought and belief

Throughout the centuries

On just what it is that we believe concerning Jesus.

In seminary, I was very interested in this.

In fact, I won the Theological Achievement Award

“Only Jesus”

In my graduating class
Without finishing my bachelor’s degree.

But over the years, I confess, I’ve become a bit disillusioned.

What I have seen in the theological debate
Is the church’s attempt to force a person
To conform to a certain set of beliefs.

Some of which are very Biblical.
And some suppositions derived
From the Biblical narrative.

As I see it, theology has caused many divisions
In the church.

46,000 denominations is proof of this.

~~

I asked a question once
In one of my theology classes in seminary.

The question followed a discussion on this very subject.

What are the essential tenets of the Christian faith?

Reading from all of these different theologians
All of them pontificating their different positions
I asked my professor:

“So just what is it then, Dr. Finger, that defines a Christian?”

“What are the essentials? The bottom line?”

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And his reply?

“The definition of a Christian is simply this:
One who believes Jesus is Lord!”

“But what about all that other stuff?
The massive amount of material written by theologians?”

“It is mere commentary!”

~~

I quote from my favorite theologian, Frederick Buechner:

“Some think of a Christian as one who necessarily *believes* certain things. That Jesus was the Son of God, say. Or that Mary was a virgin. Or that the pope is infallible. Or that all other religions are all wrong.”

“Some think of a Christian as one who necessarily *does* certain things. Such as going to church. Getting baptized. Giving up liquor and tobacco. Reading the Bible. Doing a good deed a day.”

~~

But Buechner asks, what does Jesus say about himself?

John 14:6-7 NIV I am the way and the truth and the life

Jesus didn't set forth articles of faith!

He said, believe in me

What you see in me is what you'd see in God.

It is not what you believe, not what you do,

“Only Jesus”

Nor what you profess . . .

Buechner’s words

“[Jesus] said that it was only by him—by living, participating in, being caught up by, the way of life that he embodied, that was [the] way.”

~~

So my premise today is this.

Just as the transfiguration shows Jesus standing alone.

Our faith’s central focus is to be Jesus.

He is a journey . . . I am the way.

He is true . . . the truth shall set you free.

He is life . . . I came that you may have life
And have it to the full.

The way, the truth, and life in Jesus is the way of salvation.

~~

One of my favorite songs
Reminds me of Jesus’ transfiguration.

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.”

“Only Jesus”

The institutional church, as we know it,
May be crumbling under its own weight.

But that doesn't mean the ways of Jesus are dying.

In fact, it may mean it is morphing into something else.

It may be the ultimate salvation of the church.

It may mean, we need to refocus our attention
Not on the things that divide us.

But to look up and focus on the one thing that will unite us
The Lordship of Jesus.

Perhaps that is putting it too simplistically.

Life is more complicated than that.

Perhaps.

What I do know is that the more
I'm living in, participating in,
Being caught up in, being embodied by Jesus

The more alive I feel
With more purpose, more meaning,
More sense of direction in life

With Jesus than without.

~~

“Only Jesus”

The bottom line of the Christian faith is about relationships
Our relationship to Jesus
And our relationships to one another.

~~

David Brooks of the New York Times
Wrote an op-ed in the Richmond Times Dispatch
This past week.

In it, he writes, he discovered something of significance.

He writes about an organization
From the Aspen Institute called
“Weave: The Social Fabric Project.”

Its core ideas are:

“Social isolation is the problem underlying a lot of our other
problems. And that this problem is being solved by people around
the country, at the local level, who are building community and
weaving the social fabric.”

This is what the way of Jesus is to be about.

Weaving the fabric of his way
Into the social fabric of the communities we live in.

And the church is the perfect vessel to do it!

And maybe what is happening in our churches today
Is a symptom of not having proper focus

“Only Jesus”

On the ways of Jesus.

We who claim Jesus as Lord are to be weavers
Weaving his forgiving grace and unconditional love
Into the fabric of our human brokenness.

~~

When the clouds of isolation descend upon our lives
When we become confused and lose our direction

May Jesus come and touch us and say “get up!”

And may the cloud rescind and things become clear

And may there be one and one only in focus
Jesus, our Lord!