

Epiphany-6-c2007

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1 Corinthians 15.12-20

First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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Faith and Futility

“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” —1 Corinthians 15.17

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

One thing I need to clear up right up front this morning. My sermon title does *not* refer to the discussion we’ll be having about the church budget at our annual meeting following the service! (If you’d like to hear my opinion about that, feel free to ask me during the meeting.)

No, it isn’t budget futility I have in mind today. It is something different. Let me start by inviting you to think of your own individual illustrations for this morning sermon. Think of something that you’ve

ever assembled—something you’ve built, something you’ve put together. I’m a geeky guy, so I’ve built myself a few computers over the years. Perhaps some of you have as well. Or maybe you’ve built furniture or model airplanes. Or perhaps houses, or maybe you’ve tinkered with old trucks. Whatever. I’ll talk about my computers, but you think about whatever it is that you’ve put together.

Despite my best efforts, I always seem to end up with parts left over at the end. Sometimes it doesn’t matter, but sometimes it does. If I put three screws instead of four to hold in the hard drive, it will probably be okay. But if I have a leftover fan for cooling the processor, that isn’t going to be good—as the single most important part of the computer will be fried within seconds of turning it on. Some parts are nice, but not essential. Some parts are absolutely necessary.

Our Epistle Lesson this morning reminds us of one of the “essential parts” of the Christian faith. Writing to the Corinthians about the resurrection, Paul wants them to understand that it is fundamental. It needs to be properly in place for the rest of their faith to be solidly constructed. Otherwise, according to the Apostle, the whole project is

futile. Without the resurrection securely in place, the Christian faith is like a computer without a processor fan. It may look like a computer from a distance, but if you turn it on it will quickly turn into a smoking pile of junk. Care must be taken.

Paul is affirming a basic tenant of Jewish, as well as Christian, theology. As inheritors of our faith tradition, we believe in the *resurrection of the body*. That is, we believe that God will redeem our bodies at the consummation of human history and the final inauguration of the Kingdom of God. Our bodies will be *different*, of course, but they will be part of God's final plan. Orthodox Christianity does not leave a lot of room for talk of "souls going to heaven." The true Christian vision is more communal and more apocalyptic.

Paul takes this staple of Jewish theology and reformulates it to account for the special role of Jesus Christ. By affirming Christ's bodily resurrection, Christians name Jesus as the "first fruits" of the final resurrection for which we hope and yearn. Because we believe in the resurrection of the dead, we can understand what happened to Jesus.

And, because we believe in what happened to Jesus, we can understand the resurrection of the dead. The logic runs two ways.

In Paul's day—as in ours—this vision made for some intellectual discomfort among more sophisticated Christians. In Corinth, apparently, there were many people who wished to call themselves Christians, but who did not wish to affirm any gobbledygook about the resurrection. They want the teachings of Jesus. They want the liturgy of the church. But they don't want difficult, supernatural beliefs. In other passages of his many letters, Paul tries to *reassure* readers who may be anxious about eternal salvation. In this passage, however, he is trying to *produce* anxiety. He wants them to consider the full consequences of their intellectual stubbornness. He makes the point forcefully and repeatedly:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. (15.13-14)

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. (15.16-17)

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (15.19)

According to Paul, Christian faith without the resurrection is an exercise in futility. It is like when you leave out an essential part from your personal building project. It may look okay from a distance, but it won't hold up under the use for which it is intended. That is the definition of futility: work expended on something that has no chance of functioning properly.

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, one of my old professors puts it well: “For Paul, the whole web of Christian discourse is airy nonsense if it is not anchored in the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. Christian preaching becomes a system of delusions, offering nothing but lies and empty gestures. The gospel has no power to save us if Christ is not raised, and therefore the Corinthians are still lost in their sins, their hope of reconciliation with God based on futile human fantasy.”¹

Hope.

¹ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians—Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), page 260.

That's really the bottom-line issue. Are we going to put our trust in God's power, or are we going to put our trust in human religion? By affirming the resurrection, we confess that it is not our pretty philosophies that save us. It is God's power—the same power that lifted Jesus from the grave and that will some day do the same for each of us.

We do well to remember, however, that even tough old Paul realized that belief in the resurrection is a difficult thing. Some of us accept this central Christian doctrine with relative ease. For others of us, it is a struggle—maybe a lifelong struggle. It is significant, I think, that Paul took so much time to address people who were struggling. His arguments are intended to be provocative and persuasive, but they are not *dismissive*. Paul takes our doubts seriously. No one knows better than Paul about the possibility of conversion and changes of heart. Because he came to know the risen Christ in a new way, Paul fervently believes that each of us can as well.

I hope he's right.

Let us pray. Help us, God, to put the risen Christ at the center of our faith...and of our lives. Amen.