

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 2/15/2021

Ash Wednesday

Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, February 16 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, let our prayers be for those who have experienced abuse by churches because they didn't meet the standards those congregations set for their members. Pray that they might come to know the love of God that is based on faith alone and that we find meaningful ways to share that message.

Though Lent doesn't officially start until this Wednesday—Ash Wednesday—and Good Friday is seven weeks away, I thought it might be good to consider why it was that Jesus was crucified. Certainly, the charge brought against him by the Jewish leadership was blasphemy—falsely using God's name, and specifically claiming to be God. But the real problem for those leaders was that Jesus was challenging the teachings that they traditionally held based on their understanding of the Law, the first five books of the Bible. Here are those central teachings and how Jesus called them into question.

- 1) Only Jews could have a saving relationship with God. God had chosen the nation of Israel and was not going to include non-Jews in the Kingdom of God. And interacting with non-Jews made you unclean and unworthy of the Kingdom.
- 2) Only men could fully be in the Kingdom. Women were considered second-class at best and were often viewed simply as property. Some rabbis even said that women did not have souls.
- 3) Only those who were faithful keepers of the Law—those who were holy and ritually pure—would receive the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom was not available to those who didn't eat kosher food or faithfully observe the Sabbath, much less those were clearly sinful like prostitutes, adulterers, or tax collectors who associated with foreigners (see 1 above).
- 4) Only the healthy could enter the Kingdom of God. Those who had sickness obviously were being punished by God so no one with physical illness, deformity, or other physical or mental disabilities would be included.

5) Only the wealthy would be received into God's Kingdom. If you were poor, again, you were under God's judgment. Though the those who were financially well-off would receive blessings by giving alms to the poor, the poor were not on the list of those invited into the Kingdom.

Now look at what Jesus did and you'll understand why he upset the religious leaders so much. Jesus spoke to a Samaritan woman who was living with someone outside of wedlock (see 1, 2, and 3 above). Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors (3). Jesus regularly laid hands on—touched—the diseased and possessed (4). Jesus raised up before His listeners the woman who gave her last two coins to the poor in contrast to the wealthy (5). Jesus and His disciples picked grain on the Sabbath (3). Jesus healed on the Sabbath (3, 4). Jesus allowed a sinful woman to anoint His feet (2, 3). The list goes on and on.

More than just understanding why the religious leaders opposed Jesus and sought to have Him crucified, we all would do well to reflect on what His actions say to us today. Are there those who we fail to include? Do we look down upon some as being less worthy of God's love? Do we judge others on the basis of their behaviors or situations without looking at our own habits and choices? The words and actions of Jesus were applicable not just back then but today as well. There is a saying that goes like this: "If Christianity were a crime, would there be enough evidence in your life to convict you?" Lent can be a very good time to take stock in our lives and choices in light of the example that Jesus set for us. Doing so can help to make this penitential season more meaningful in the weeks ahead.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey