

"Followers of Jesus"
 Ezekiel 34:25-31
 1 Corinthians 1:10-18
 January 23, 2011
 Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

This is the Sunday we're to talk about Christianity. My sermon comes in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. When Paul was speaking to the people of Corinth, he said, "There should be no divisions among you...[yet] each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas.'" It's like we would say, "I'm Orthodox!" "I'm a Catholic!" "I'm a Baptist!" "I'm a Methodist!"

It almost seems that Christians have more differences than we have much in common. Today many people don't seem to care much about denomination; they just want to be part of a church where they are comfortable. Or frankly, most people aren't even interested in church at all. But for those who are, those who feel being a Christian has some relevance in today's world, for those people when choosing a church, one might want to know a bit about where the church stands in the theological spectrum and also how it puts its beliefs into practice.

So a quick historical survey shows us how, though we started as one body of Christ, over the centuries, we have become quite diverse.

The earliest Christians were Jews who followed Jesus. You could say they were a Jewish sect. Then when Paul opened baptism to gentiles (non-Jews), Christianity slowly became its own religion, separate from Judaism, but with Christians still reading the Hebrew Bible. In the early centuries of the Common Era, councils met to pin down the beliefs of the Church. The Apostles' Creed was one of the early statements of belief that has survived since the 700s.

Many of you memorized this:

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
 maker of heaven and earth;
 And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, dead, and buried;
 the third day he rose from the dead;
 he ascended into heaven,
 and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
 from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
 I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic church,
 the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body,
 and the life everlasting. Amen.

This creed tells the basic beliefs of Christians around the world. "The holy catholic church" here means the universal church. This is to say that God's universal church is based on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the year 1054, the Eastern Orthodox Church split from the Roman Catholic Church, over an understanding of the Holy Spirit. Today Orthodox Christians (Greek Orthodox, Russian, Georgian, Armenian, etc.) have more focus on the mystical presence of the Spirit. The Divine Liturgy is rich in sensory experience with incense, a cappella singing, and icons. (Muza gave me an icon from a cathedral in Georgia, blessed by a priest. It is of Mary with her son Jesus.)

The Roman Church spread Christianity through the Holy Roman Empire, developing monastic communities in the Middle Ages. In the Roman Catholic tradition, we have St. Patrick who brought Christianity to Ireland in the 5th century. Our gathering song is from St. Patrick's Breastplate Prayer: "Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me." You might have seen the film "Vision," depicting the life of Hildegard of Bingen, a German abbess, one of the few feminists in the early Catholic Church. Another Roman Catholic, St. Francis of Assisi, was born in the late 12th century, and his prayer, which we said as a Call to Worship, is one of the favorites in all Christendom. Though the mass in an Orthodox Church or a Roman Catholic Church is different from our worship tradition, we can appreciate the prayer, the candles, the music, and of course the Sacrament of Holy Communion, which we have in common.

So the first two major groups within Christianity are Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. The third major group of Christians is the group we fall into: Protestants. In the 16th century in Germany and Switzerland, the Protestant Reformation challenged the authority of Rome; the people "protested," condemning the Church for corruption and emphasizing salvation by grace, not works. The new emphasis was on scripture as the basis of belief, and on the priesthood of all believers. (Have you noticed, it says on our bulletin "Ministers: Members of the congregation." That means each of us has a personal relationship with God—we don't have to go through a priest or the Pope to relate to God—and we are called, each of us, to be in ministry.)

Protestants evolved into 3 main groups in Europe: Lutheran and Reformed churches in continental Europe and the Anglican Church in England. Then in the 18th century, the Wesleyan Movement, a revival within the Church of England, eventually brought Methodism to the United States. Other Protestant groups also came to America—the Mennonites and other Anabaptist groups favoring adult baptism, as well as the Baptists we know today. The Reformed tradition led to the Presbyterian Church. An offshoot of the Wesleyan Movement was the Holiness Movement that led to Pentecostal churches. And today there are many independent, non-denominational churches. We often call them community churches. These churches do not adhere to standards from any official church;

they may not have seminary-trained ministers or policies agreed upon by any governing body. The Mormon Church, founded in the 1800s, considers itself Christian, though it is not considered Christian by some Christians of other denominations because in addition to the Bible it uses the Book of Mormon as its sacred scripture.

History is one way to look at the different churches that have come about in this country. Another way to look at all the churches we have is to examine doctrinal differences. At the heart of all Christian churches is the common belief in Jesus Christ as Son of God, and that the life, and death, and resurrection of Jesus brings salvation. Exactly what we mean by this may vary among Christian groups, but the central figure is Jesus.

Some of the differences within Christianity can be listed as the role of the clergy, the meaning of baptism, the importance of the Trinity, how we understand freewill, how we interpret scripture, and what we mean by the afterlife. If I were to go up and down Snyder Lane asking Catholics, Baptists, people of the Assembly of God, Methodists, Lutherans, and Episcopalians about the afterlife, I bet there would be some different answers. If I were to ask everyone here at St. John's about baptism, we might even have some disagreement. Some of the differences can be labeled conservative vs. liberal. Particularly on how we interpret the Bible, you'll find churches and individuals line up as conservative if they interpret the Bible literally or liberal if they interpret the Bible symbolically. The United Methodist Church is considered progressive because it permits a wide spectrum of theological belief.

So our historical differences and our doctrinal differences have brought us to this point. We have many churches within Christianity, approximately 38,000 denominations. About 1/3 of the world's population is Christian.

So what? How does being Christian affect who we are and how we live? Does our particular brand of Christianity influence how we respond to events around us?

Let's take a case study: For the last two weeks, the media has been full of the story of the Tucson shootings on January 8. Jared Loughner opened fire and killed 6 people and wounded 13 others outside a supermarket in Tucson, Arizona. One of the people shot was U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, who is fortunately recovering and now starting physical therapy.

Certainly the universal Christian response to this tragedy has been an outpouring of compassion. Christians are praying for the survival and recovery of those hurt, and we are praying for the families of those who died. Prayer is a common practice in all faiths that believe in God. For Christians it is a response that imitates Jesus' compassion for people in need and his own practice of prayer. To be a follower of Jesus means to show compassion.

The priest of the Catholic Church where one of the victims, 9-year-old Christina Green, worshiped, said, "[Her parents] are operating on borrowed strength and unceasing prayer. It's one day at a time. Our parishioners have showered them with food and flowers, hugs

and cards.... A tragedy like this doesn't make sense, but we owe it to Christina to keep singing." (*Father Richard Troutman*
<http://www.catholicmatch.com/blog/2011/01/christina-green's-priest-reflects-on-tucson-shooting/>.
 This is a showing of compassion. (I think a United Methodist minister could have said it that way, just as well.)

Some of the other responses reported in the media seem less compassionate. Very quickly the Tucson story became a stage for Democratic and Republican accusations. Because Jared Loughner was apparently planning to assassinate Representative Giffords, a Democrat, it was supposed that Sarah Palin's targeting of Giffords' Arizona district in gun crosshairs ads was part of the cause of the violence. Then the debate became about civility and accusing political parties of not being civil with one another. The implication was that Jared Loughner's shooting was caused by vitriolic political argument. But as I was watching this news reporting unfold, I kept saying, "That's not what it's about." Finally David Brooks on the Lehrer News Hour said what I was thinking. "Jared Loughner is a person "with a mental illness, possibly with schizophrenia." <http://www.5min.com/Video/David-Brooks-Criticizes-the-Media-Coverage-of-the-Tucson-Shooting-516935701>. David Brooks faults the media for not looking at the evidence. The evidence shows that Jared Loughner was a very disturbed young man. Politicians seemed so quick to hand out blame to the other political party. Could it be that it was simply a man with a mental illness? Later Brooks wrote a column about humility and how we need to admit that we do not know everything. To be followers of Jesus, we need to show humility.

If we look at this through the lens of compassion and humility, we see not only those who were shot as victims, but we also see the perpetrator of the crime as a victim, a victim of untreated mental illness. Jared Loughner was disturbed enough to be discharged from his community college. People were afraid of him. He said strange things and had peculiar fears. He needed psychiatric evaluation and treatment, which he apparently did not receive.

Followers of Jesus are people who are agents of change in society. Perhaps in the aftermath of this tragedy, some will work for better access to mental health care. Perhaps some will work for better gun control laws, so that a person with psychiatric problems is not able to get a gun. Followers of Jesus are people who work from the perspective of love and justice, not from the perspective of hatred.

President Obama's speech at the memorial service for the victims of the Tucson shootings was compassionate and offered healing to the victims' families and to the nation. The President said, "it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds." (Obama, Jan. 12)
 Followers of Jesus seek healing.

At an interfaith memorial service United Methodist Bishop Minerva Carcaño, said: "Let us be agents of hope by committing to work for justice, that peace, God's own peace, may come upon us. Our children expect no less of us."
<http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=lwL4KnN1LtH&b=5847611&ct=9024391¬oc=1>

Followers of Jesus are agents of hope.

One "Christian" group was way off base. The Westboro Baptist Church wanted to picket the Tucson funerals to demonstrate that the violence of the shooting was the consequence of a society that allows gay rights. A Christian network gave this church minutes on the air so that they would agree not to picket the funerals.

[http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2011/01/13/Church-wont-picket-two-Tucson-funerals/UPI-26131294920098/-Westboro Baptist Ch](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2011/01/13/Church-wont-picket-two-Tucson-funerals/UPI-26131294920098/-Westboro-Baptist-Ch)

This kind of group gives Christians a bad name. Followers of Jesus demonstrate love, not hate.

To be a Christian means to be a follower of Jesus. It doesn't matter if you choose to be a Roman Catholic or a Methodist; it doesn't matter if you choose to attend a high mass or an informal spirituality group. What matters is that you follow Jesus. That means to be compassionate and humble. That means to work for change and operate out of love and justice. That means to seek healing and to be an agent of hope.

God's wish for us is that we "live in safety, and [that] no one shall make [us] afraid, says the Prophet Ezekiel. Followers of Jesus are needed at times like this—in Tucson, and in Rohnert Park.