**People On the Grow**

**Hebrews 12:1-2**

Rev. J. Douglas Paterson

October 8, 2017

In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue. I doubt there are many of us here (at least in my generation) that did not learn that little rhyme when in grade school and were taught that “Columbus sailed the ocean blue” on his way to “discovering” the New World. Today, few people claim that Columbus was the first European to sail to the Americas. There seems to be overwhelming evidence that the Norse beat him to it centuries before. There’s also the fact that what was a “New World” to the Europeans had been occupied for millennia and was not new at all to human civilization. Even so, on Monday, this nation celebrates Columbus Day, commemorating his voyage on the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria.

Columbus thought he was discovering some parts of Asia not described by Marco Polo or other Western authorities. He also believed he had found a new maritime route to the East Indies that would circumvent Muslim-controlled land routes and waterways around Africa. When he landed in the Antilles (the Caribbean Islands), Columbus referred to the resident peoples he encountered there as "Indians" believing that he had reached the Indian Ocean. Although Columbus soon recognized that he had not reached the Indies, the name stuck, and the Islands in the Caribbean are still referred to today as the West Indies.

So why this elementary history lesson in today’s sermon? Because some of the back story of Columbus’ voyages actually relates to why the church needs to consistently change and grow if the love of God in Jesus is going to be good news to the world. And it is not just this organization we call Church, but we as individuals must change and grow in the spirit of Christ.

In his book The Spiritual Migration, Brian McLaren reminds us that thirty seven years before Columbus sailed the ocean blue, Pope Nicholas V issued an official document called *Romanus Pontifex* which gave European Christian kings the “moral authority” to enslave, plunder, and slaughter in the name of discovery. McLaren quotes this part of the document:

“invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possession, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.” (Pg. 77)

This is the statement that became the basis for what is known as the Doctrine of Discovery. In 1493, one year after Columbus “discovered” the Americas, Pope Alexander VI issued an edict that supported Spain’s strategy to ensure its exclusive right to the lands “discovered” by Columbus. The edict stated that any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be “discovered,” claimed, and exploited by Christian rulers and declared that “the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.” This “Doctrine of Discovery” became the basis of all European claims in the Americas as well as the foundation for the United States’ western expansion. Let’s spread Christianity by killing, pillaging and enslaving.

So as we celebrate Columbus Day as a nation, we do so with mixed emotions. I still want to celebrate Columbus as the brave, adventurous sailor that he was. The way we tell it, Columbus’ story is a very romantic one. But we shouldn’t overlook that his motives were less than noble, and his treatment of other humans were deplorable.

Unfortunately, he was simply a man of his times. His ambition, combined with the Church that had lost its moral compass, created some pretty horrendous situations for the “New Word” and its people. And it was the church that was the catalyst that made way for the abuse and slavery that came to be.

Now I don’t want to be critical of the Church. This is the institution that has cradled me, matured me and sustained me. It’s not a perfect institution. And there are times in history, where as an institution, it almost becomes evil. And that happens in almost all institutions because we want to maintain the goodness for which they were developed. Somewhere in the evolution, however, maintaining or growing the institution becomes more important than the mission or the people. Or more to the point, the product becomes so all-important that all means are justified to reach the ends.

For Pope Nicholas V and Alexander VI, I am sure their desire was that the world might come to know Christ. But sometimes, because we have the power and authority, we move from inviting to inflicting, and the Christian message is no longer “good news.”

That’s when the Church as an institution needs to change. That’s been our theme here the last few weeks with our series “Faith on the Grow.” We seem to be in a time when the church as an institution needs to find a new way, if it is going to be “good news” for the world. The world is tired of empty words. What it desires is faith in action. So how is the church as an institution going to change?

Well, here’s the difficult news, institutions don’t change, unless the people who make up the institution change and bring the institution with them. So friends, if we think the Church needs to be different, then you and I need to be different. And I am not talking about being different for difference sake. I am talking about discovering again what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

We have already talked about how it has less to do with correct beliefs and more to do with good behavior. If you want to impress your friends you can tell them that you are more concerned with orthopraxy than with orthodoxy (correct conduct as opposed to correct belief). But how do we judge conduct. Well, as followers of Jesus we need to follow Jesus. As simple and silly and faddish as it became, we need to keep the acronym WWJD (what would Jesus do) before us.

The author of Hebrews put it this way in our lesson today (in the words of Eugene Peterson and The Message):

*Do you see what this means – all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we’d better get on with it. Strip down, start running – and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed – that exhilarating finish in and with God. He could put up with anything along the way; cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s there, in the place of honor, right alongside God.*

He goes on to say in verse 3 which we didn’t read as part of the lesson, but I like the way Peterson puts it: *When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over the story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!*

So what was it that Jesus did that we should follow in his likeness, pulling the institutional Church with us? We could go through the litany. He healed the sick, comforted the poor, and fed the hungry. He forgave, blessed, and hung around misfits and miscreants. He gave precedence to the least and companionship to the lonely, acceptance to the outcast and stranger. In short, he loved. That was our sermon last week when we talked about moving from believing to loving.

But here is the ironic twist about loving the way Jesus loved. Love is not the sum of all these good things we can do with and for others. Love begins, first, by not exercising the power and authority, and privilege that we may have. The word is *kenosis* and it means self-emptying. It is the word Paul uses in the second chapter of Philippians when he is encouraging the church to love as Jesus loved by doing nothing from selfishness or conceit, but conduct oneself with humility, counting others as better than yourself.

“Think like Jesus”, Paul says, “even though he had equal status to God, he didn’t think so much of himself as to cling on to the advantages that came with that status. Rather, he set aside those privileges so that he could be a servant to others.” Simply put, the modus operandi of Jesus, the secret of loving like Jesus, is the radical rejection of dominating supremacy in all its forms.

That is where institutions usually lose their way. It is how the church loses its way throughout the centuries, but especially in the era of 1492 when Columbus sailed the ocean blue, by acting out with its power, authority and supremacy (real or imagined).

But here is what happened. While the church was acting out with abusive dominance, there was one person who kept reading the Bible saying, “This doesn’t make sense.” His name has been coming up repeatedly during this “Faith on the Grow” series, and rightly so. We celebrate, especially among our Lutheran brothers and sisters, the 500th year of his bravery and outspokenness this month. Twenty five years after Columbus made his first voyage and the pope encouraged enslaving all non-Christians, Martin Luther challenged the church to think differently.

“Go back to the Bible,” he said. Read again what God was doing in Jesus. This is a movement about grace, not about dominance. This is a story about compassion not control. This is a story about sacrifice not selfish accumulation. This is a story about letting loose the Spirit of God not hoarding it.

One person took a stand, although there were many who agreed and lined up with him. And the Church did not like it. It is hard to give up power and authority. But because one person saw the need for the Church to change, the Church grew in Spirit and wisdom. Now someone might say the Church didn’t change, it split – Protestants from the Roman Catholic. But I am convinced that even though the Church split, we all grew in the way of Christ. The Roman Catholic Church is often leading in the way of Christian servant hood, taking on the mind of Christ, even as Luther envisioned it.

The Church as an institution grew in its faith and evolved in it mission and ministry because individuals like Martin Luther and others saw the need for change. They reminded the church that our power and authority comes from giving up dominance and supremacy. It comes from emptying ourselves of our privileges so that we can more accurately reflect the grace of God in Jesus.

In the end institutions like the Church can only reflect the priorities of its constituents. If the church is going to grow in the spirit of Christ to more clearly reflect the love of God, than we as individuals must do the same. As Mahatma Gandhi said (in so many words), “Be the change you wish to see.”

I pray that will be true in your life and in mine. Amen.