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## BEING A REAL CHRISTIAN

1 Peter 2: 1-10; John 14: 1-19

What does it mean to be a real Christian? That's my question this morning. What does it mean to be a real Christian?...

In a world that is increasingly pluralistic, made up of people of different faiths, people of no faith or people who question faith... in such a world it is all the more important that we find an answer to this question for ourselves: What does it mean to be a real Christian?

Well, let's begin with beliefs. A Christian should believe in something no? Certainly. But too much Christianity has loaded us with too many beliefs that are supposed to be essential, even mandatory for being a Christian. But you know, as far as I'm concerned, there is one core belief that makes any person a Christian in their beliefs. Here it is: I believe that Jesus gives me the clearest, purest, most revealing picture of God. Jesus gives me that picture in what he teaches about God and also how he embodies God. That's it. To believe in God may be something we Christians do. But so do people of other faiths like Islam and Judaism. They believe in God too. But what distinguishes Christians is that we believe that Jesus gives us the clearest and truest picture of a God we can believe in and connect to in prayer and worship.

Of course, there are all kinds of other beliefs that follow this core belief. How we understand God depends on how we understand Jesus. And this understanding then shapes the way we see ourselves, our world, the purpose of our lives and the principles by which we choose to live. But the one belief that binds us together as Christians is the picture of God taught and embodied in Jesus. We call him the Christ when we can believe that he is the anointed one, the messiah, the one who has the authority to speak for God and act as God.

But is that it? No, certainly not. A real Christian not only has beliefs and one core belief in particular, but they also participate in spiritual practices. So what are spiritual practices? First of all, spiritual practices are things we do together with other fellow Christians. I know some people claim to be Christian and spiritual but not religious, by which they mean they don't go to church all that often and being invested in a community of faith with other Christians is not a priority in their lives. But the Christianity we're given in the New Testament is incomprehensible outside communities of faith where people are nurtured, supported, rooted and developed together in worshipful fellowship.

Spiritual practices we do with others include worship, prayer, singing, music and a fellowship of expressed care and concern for one another, as well as eating, laughing and playing together as Christians; and in fact any form of mutual engagement that inspires and deepens the way we relate to the God revealed and embodied in Jesus can become a spiritual practice.

And this leads to the second point about spiritual practices. They're done with others but they're also done alone. And some of the practices that become spiritual for us have to do with who we are and what works for us as individual persons. Whether these are more traditional practices of prayer, reading and reflection, or personal engagement with art of some kind, or outdoor activity, physical activity, yoga, various forms of meditation, sacred time with friends or alone time... something becomes a spiritual practices that opens us up inside to connect with the sacred other we call God and whose being is given definition in the teaching and witness of Jesus.

So then, being a real Christian includes some basic beliefs and some basic spiritual practices. But is that it? Absolutely not! We're forgetting a very basic element of being a real Christian and it's tied directly to the God Jesus reveals and embodies. What we believe and what we practice spiritually must also be connected with the way we live in relationship to others and to this earth. So how should we live practically if we are real Christians? In a word, it's all about love. What we believe about God should be about love, our spiritual practices should inspire love, and how we live should be love. How I live concretely in my life, the choices I make, the things I pursue, the reasons I pursue them, the ways I relate to people, my commitments, principles and priorities.... It's all about love.

But you know, love is so big a word, a mushy, sentimentalized word, a word so overused and often abused, that it can have little meaning and impact for us. Unless we invest in it, unless we work at it, focus on it and get inspired by it... unless it costs us something too, love cannot be all that abundant and real.

Well, what is love that is abundant and real? Before we look at our scriptures for some guidance, let me share a story, a true story. This story took place not so long ago in the Central African Republic. This is a place where Christians and Muslims have been fighting one another and sometimes killing one another. It is also a place where there has been drought and famine. Ibrahim Adamou is an 11 year old Muslim boy. When he was 8, he witnessed his parents killed in front of him. They were killed by Militiamen who called themselves Christians. He didn't know whether any of his five brothers and sisters were still alive, but he was on the run and in hiding. He travelled 100 kilometres barefoot and alone. He slept in the thick cover of banana trees at night. He wasn't sure exactly where he was going. Finally, he encountered some peacekeepers who gave him some cookies and pointed the way to Carnot, where a Catholic church was sheltering some 800 Muslims, including many ethnic 'Peuls' like Ibrahim.

But how was Ibrahim going to get there, exhausted and disoriented as he was? A man with a motorcycle offered to take him. He said he was a Christian. Could Ibrahim trust him given what he had seen of Christians so far in his young life? He had little choice but to accept the offer. After some time on the road, they reached a military checkpoint. The Militiamen looked exactly like the ones who had killed Ibrahim's parents. They also claimed to be Christians. They told the man to leave the boy there so they would kill him. But the man refused. According to Ibrahim, the man told the militiamen this: "If you are going to kill him, you must kill me too." Surprisingly, they let them pass and Ibrahim was dropped off at the church where he was safe.

So, what does it mean to be a real Christian? Our gospel reading is a well-known passage of scripture... In my Father's house there are many rooms.... I am the way, the truth, the life, no one comes to the Father except through me... If you love me you will keep my commandments... I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live... The traditional interpretation of this passage is that our beliefs about Jesus make us real Christians. If Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and keeping his commandments is proof that we love him, we get to heaven by following Jesus in our beliefs.... But, when I read this passage again through the eyes of the Muslim boy Ibrahim, I see a real Christian in a very different way.

Jesus is the way the truth and the life because of the quality of love he shows us... Jesus is no longer among us in flesh and blood, but only through his Spirit, the "Advocate" as the Spirit is called in our reading. We see him in a way the world no longer sees him when we see his kind of love embodied in the actions and lives of people, real people. Beliefs that don't have the flesh of real love like Jesus' love cannot be trusted as real. Those Militiamen may claim to be Christians in their beliefs. They may claim to be followers of Christ by keeping God's commandments. But they live and act totally contrary to the Christ of the gospels, to the way of his kind of love. They can't be real Christians. The man on the motorbike, however, who is ready to give up his life for the sake of this little Muslim boy... to give up his life for no personal benefit of any kind other than his unspoken belief that this is what it means to believe in the God Jesus teaches and embodies... this is a real Christian.

What our gospel passage is really saying, then, is that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life because of the kind of concrete and costly love he reveals and embodies. We cannot see Jesus in the flesh, but we can see him in the flesh of other people... the way they live, the choices they make, their humility, compassion, commitment to justice that will cost them, forgiveness that will also cost them.... I would trust the beliefs of such people much more so than those who have all their Christian i's dotted and their t's crossed, those who attend church, give money, profess Christian statements of faith, even those who talk the language of love... but then live their lives for themselves and over against others... I wouldn't trust such people as real Christians. Those who really live love and show love in a committed way, however, these are people whose beliefs I can trust, whose spiritual practices I can learn from, whose fellowship will benefit me.

We may not know everything about a person by their actions... We don't know their motivations, their agendas, their possibly manipulative intentions in helping us... But what a person does is a good place to start in terms of getting to know who they are. My beliefs, my practices and my commitments must come together with the way I live... Jesus is the way, the truth and the life wherever his kind of love is found, no matter the creed. The world may no longer see Jesus, but we will see Jesus wherever we find his kind of love in action. Whether someone claims to be a Christian, a Muslim, an atheist, an agnostic or something else... If they live genuine Jesus' love and embody such love, then something of Christ lives in them whether they realize it or not, accept it or not. If they do not live Jesus' love, then it doesn't matter what they say they believe or practice, Christ is not truly resurrected among them.

Of course, all of us without exception, from the greatest to the least, are on a journey. All of us fail even when we succeed. All of us have our moments when love is not what we live and sometimes there are consequences we can't just make right. People are hurt, they can't trust us, they feel dismissed, neglected, mistreated... Part of Jesus' love we are challenged to live and grow is about repentance and forgiveness... We don't just become loving people naturally. It takes work and commitment. It takes honest self-discovery and listening to the feelings of others towards us. It requires change, change we choose not just the change that comes upon us unchosen.

Being a Christian is also about finding the peace and assurance of believing we are loved even when we feel unlovable, even when our failings trouble us and haunt us as they sometimes should... God loves us infinitely and Jesus shows us this. We ought to love ourselves and we ought to learn ever more deeply how to love others...

Beliefs matter, and to be a Christian is to believe Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. But this way, this truth and this life is about the love Jesus lives, dies and rises again to inspire. Do you know something of such love in your heart?

Let us pray: Dear God... open our eyes to see you... open our hearts to feel you... open our minds to discern you all around us.... Open our spirits to commit to you in our believing, our practicing and our living as Jesus shows us the way.... Amen.