

"Marks of Authentic Christianity"
Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year C
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Text: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
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Authenticity is important to us. In many, if not all areas of our lives, authenticity matters. When we want something, we usually would prefer the genuine article with no substitutes, reproductions, counterfeits, clones, knock-offs, or look-a-likes. We want the real deal. We want the genuine article. We want whatever it is to be authentic.

I would like to suggest that it is no less true for Christianity. We want authentic Christianity. We want the real thing when it comes to our religious practice. Our faith needs to be genuine. We aren't going to offer to the world much of a witness that is credible and attractive if it is fake. So what is authentic Christianity? How do we distinguish it from inauthentic Christianity? What are the marks or characteristics that help us to identify, and more importantly, to be engaged in the practice of a Christian faith that can be seen by the world around us as authentic.

The writer of Hebrews gives us some help at this point. Our focal passage for today is Hebrews 12:28-13:14, a portion of which

appears with the other lectionary passages in your bulletin. I want to read this entire passage for you, and then I would like for us to spend some time this morning looking at it together more closely. I suggest to you that in this passage there are seven marks of authentic Christianity, seven marks that characterize an expression of Christian faith that is genuine, the real deal.

The first of these marks is **acceptable worship** (12:28-29). We touched on this characteristic last week. In authentic Christianity there is worship that is characterized by reverence and awe that grow out of a spirit of gratitude for who God is and what God has done for us in giving us the kingdom. Acceptable worship is God-directed. It is focused on God, centered on God, directed toward God. It is not focused on ourselves, and it is not centered on the preacher. It is directed toward God in response to who God is and what God has done for us.

Acceptable worship is not as concerned about what I get out of it as it is concerned about what I put into it. *Worship is work*. That is the literal meaning of the word "liturgy," the work of the people. Worship is the work I do to proclaim the worth and value of God in my life. It is to praise God, to thank God, to confess to God, to hear God's word proclaimed, and then to commit myself afresh and anew to God's way of living in this world. All of this is involved in acceptable worship,

and if I am engaged in it to the extent I should be, I am going to leave the sanctuary tired from the effort I have put in to acknowledge once again the wonderful nature and character of the God I adore and who loves me unconditionally.

The second mark of authentic Christianity is **concentric love** (13:1-3). What is concentric love? Look at the passage. The writer of Hebrews describes three stages of love—love for the members of the community of faith, love for strangers, and love for the underprivileged. This kind of process of loving is concentric in that it begins with those closest to us and extends to those who are distant from us. We first love those we know well, then we reach out to those we don't know well, and then finally to those with whom we have little in common—those who have been ignored or disenfranchised by the world.

Authentic Christianity is present when there is genuine community, what we spent the summer talking about in our film series. There is genuine community when there is inclusiveness, openness, acceptance. The authentic Christian community of faith is made up of persons who love one another and then reach out to embrace the world, being willing to welcome and embrace those who are very different.

But look carefully at the passage. Concentric love is not complete until it brings us to the point of being in solidarity with those persons who are oppressed. We are to remember those who are in prison, as

though we were in prison with them. We are to be in solidarity with those who are being tortured as well. There are people in parts of the world who are in prison and who are being tortured unjustly. In some cases it is because they are, in fact, innocent. In other cases it is because they have dared to speak and act out against oppressive political regimes. Authentic Christianity involves reaching out to such persons as these in Christian love.

The third mark of authentic Christianity is a **committed marriage and family life** (13:4). The passage says, "Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers." In my opinion, marriage is honored as it is supposed to be only when the commitment that is made to it is an unconditional commitment.

Marriage begins with a commitment. We call the terms of that commitment vows. Unconsciously, the vows we make are often more conditional than unconditional. Specifically, we commit ourselves to remain faithful as long as our needs are met, as long as our expectations are fulfilled, and as long as we feel the way we want to feel in the relationship.

But our needs don't always get met in our marriage and family life. Our expectations are not always fulfilled, because many times our expectations are unrealistic. We marry oftentimes to heal childhood

hurts, and that puts an incredible burden on our spouses and family members. Also, our feelings change, so much so that *love must be understood as more than just a feeling*. It must be understood as unconditional commitment to mutual growth and development as persons. This kind of unconditional commitment takes seriously the vow "until we are parted by death."

[I know many or most of you are going to disagree with me about this, after all, even the United Methodist Church doesn't agree with me, but I don't believe that the instruction here to "let marriage be held in honor by all, . . ." necessarily means that marriage is be understood exclusively as the committed relationship entered into by persons of the opposite sex. I think that it actually honors marriage to include same-sex couples and to insist that they be held to the same high standards of intimacy we expect of opposite sex couples who marry.

You see, I have had enough experience with same sex couples to trust beyond the shadow of a doubt that God has called them to be together, and I take literally and seriously the phrase in the wedding liturgy that says, "Those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder." I respect your right to disagree with me on this matter and any other. That's what it means to be United Methodists. We can have our differences and remain connected to one another in faith.]

A **simple lifestyle** (13:5-6) is the fourth mark of authentic Christianity. The writer of Hebrews advises, "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" Is this something we need to hear? We would be so much better off emotionally and spiritually if we could be free from the love of money and content with what we have. We have so much in comparison to others, yet, for some of us it is never enough. We must get to the place where we don't value ourselves and others in terms of material things. *As long as our approach to Christianity is materialistic, it will not be genuine.*

I think, now more than ever, that we must discover the principle of adequacy. We must begin to say to ourselves, "This is enough. It may not be all there is; it may not be all I want; it may not be all somebody else down the street has. But it is enough for me, because it is adequate to meet my needs." I think the key to authenticity for us as Christians has as much to do with adequacy as anything else.

The fifth mark of authentic Christianity is **spiritual leadership** (13:7). The passage says, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." Spiritual leaders are those who not only speak the word of God, but also live in such a way as to be worthy of imitation.

Those of us who are called to lead are also called to model. In authentic Christianity, we ministers must practice what we preach.

But in the church, especially the United Methodist Church, spiritual leadership is not the responsibility of the clergy alone. It is up to all of us. It is up to you. That means you also have the responsibility to know the word of God and live it, and you can't know something well enough to live it if you don't study it. Okay? I get just a little tired of hearing things like, "I don't feel like I know the Bible very well," when I observe the extremely poor attendance to Sunday School and the other Bible studies we offer around here. Come on, folks, let's be honest and admit that we could do a much better job of being spiritual leaders in the church, in our homes, and in our place of work and leisure.

The sixth mark of authentic Christianity is **sound teaching** (13:9). The writer of Hebrews warns, "Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; . . ." Authentic faith is not faddish. It is apostolic faith, the faith of the apostles. It does not change each year like new models of cars. It is not concerned about making a fashion statement. In fact, authentic Christianity is seldom, if ever, fashionable. If anything, it is old fashioned. That is not to say that authentic Christianity is out of date. Authentic Christianity is timeless and can be applied over and over and over again to each new situation.

What does it take for teaching to be sound? Well, I would suggest we borrow something I learned from Schubert Ogden. He maintains that the Christian witness must be fitting to the situation it is addressing and adequate to the content it is expressing. Ogden goes on to say that for the Christian witness of faith to be adequate to its content, it must be appropriate to Jesus Christ and credible to us. In other words, for teaching to be sound, it must be faithful to the person and work of Christ and at the same time make sense to us and be relevant to how we experience our contemporary situation. Hopefully, the teaching that is done around here is sound in this regard, but we must always be concerned about it.

Finally, authentic Christianity is marked by a **willingness to suffer** (13:11-13). The Hebrews passage reminds us that Jesus suffered in order to sanctify us by his own blood. We are to be willing to bear the same abuse he endured. We need to remember that *the Christ we follow suffered and died for us*. This is not exactly the kind of news we want to hear, but we need to hear it just the same. It is my firm conviction that authentic Christianity, whenever and wherever it is practiced, will bring about some level of suffering. For instance, try loving concentrically. At times you will experience suffering, especially with those who cannot, for one reason or another, receive that love. Try making an absolutely unconditional commitment to your

marriage and family life. At times you will suffer, especially when the job you have would just as soon you didn't have a spouse or children. Try practicing a simple lifestyle. You will suffer, especially when the Joneses figure out you are not the least bit interested in keeping up with them.

Authentic Christianity is not easy. It is easier to take shortcuts. It is easier to fake it. There is a name for that, by the way. It is hypocrisy. But what the world needs is the real thing. What the world cries out for is genuine faith. What the world is desperate for is authentic Christianity. I believe we have an honest and accurate description of it here in this passage, if we only will choose to live it.