

“The Church of What’s Happening Now”

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Psalm 146; Matthew 14:13-21

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ASSURANCE OF PARDON

There is no sin so trivial it can be ignored, no sin so terrible that God will not forgive it. While we may find ourselves unable to forgive others, sometimes even ourselves, God is far more than we are. God reaches deep into the bottomless well of mercy and offers us pardon and forgiveness of sin. Thanks be to God.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Your Word O God, is greater than the sum total of all our words. In them is hope and confidence and instruction to know and do your will. Bless the reading, the hearing, and the application of Your Word to us. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Every once in a while some magazine will run an article on the theme, “Whatever became of so-and-so?” Some once famous names from the past are researched – usually entertainers – and the article will tell us what they’re doing now. A child actress might be a housewife in upstate New York, or perhaps a once-popular singer will be a short order cook in Los Angeles.

One name I haven’t seen researched is Flip Wilson, and I’ve been curious as to what became of that one-time king of TV comedians. I really liked the guy. He didn’t need to reel off a series of four-letter words to make people laugh, and he didn’t go for the “put down” style of dark humor we see so much of these days. If you remember brother Flip, you’ll know that my sermon title this morning was his invention. The name of a character he portrayed was “The Rev,” who was a minister of an inner city storefront church. His opening line was, “I ain’t gonna tell you what happened yesterday... and I ain’t gonna talk about what’s gonna happen tomorrow, ‘cause, brothers and sisters, this is the Church of What’s Happening Now!”

Flip says he got the idea for the Church of What’s Happening Now from one of his delightful stories. It seems that the owner of a little candy store received a tax assessment of 500,000 dollars. When he complained about this staggering figure, a representative from the Assessor’s Office came to his little store to explain the situation. The assessor pointed out the fact that next to the store was a Methodist Church and its parsonage. Next to that was a Christian Science Reading Room. Around the corner was St. Mary’s Catholic Church and Parochial School, while the remainder of the block housed a Presbyterian Church. In the middle of all this stood the man’s little candy store – the only legally taxable business on the entire block. The assessor leaned over the counter and asked the store owner if he had any questions.

“Only one,” he replied, “Would you mind not leaning on my altar?” And that was the beginning of the Church of What’s Happening Now.

Saint James Presbyterian Church, meaning all of you – the Session, the Deacons, committee members, Presbyterian Women, members and friends of the Church – all of you are confronted with a tremendous opportunity. You have the opportunity to develop and verbalize precisely what kind of church you want Saint James to be.

In our Presbyterian system, every time there is a change in pastoral leadership, the church is required to prepare a Mission Statement and a Church Profile which expresses WHO you are, WHAT you

want to do, and HOW you expect to do it. And all of you are expected to contribute to this exciting and valuable process.

Now, as an old horse that has grazed in the Presbyterian Pasture for a good bunch of years, I'd like to take this opportunity to pass out a little unsolicited but well-meaning advice. I'd like to suggest that Brother Flip put his humorous finger on an accurate and necessary theological reality, whether he meant to or not. The Church of What's Happening Now is, in fact, a picture of the church Christ created. It's a description of what any Christian church ought to be.

The three briefly reported incidents the Gospel writer relates are examples of how Jesus perceived the work of the Church. In these stories, Jesus and His disciples have broken a major religious law, not just once, but twice. According to Talmudic Law, the Sabbath should be kept free of any labor whatsoever. Even the number of steps one could take were strictly limited. Sabbath meals had to be prepared a day in advance, and even the time spent in eating them was strictly limited.

The ideas of picking grain to eat, consuming synagogue bread reserved for the priest as David did, and healing a crippled man were clearly offenses against this stern law, and Jesus was flat out guilty – no question about it. I want to suggest that Jesus broke that ancient law for the specific purpose of teaching people what the true nature of the Church is. He did it to demonstrate that His church needed to be the "Church of What's Happening Now" if it was going to be faithful to its calling.

He looked around him and saw a church that had grown old and crotchety. It's dusty traditions and the weight of its laws was a mind-numbing, back breaking burden for the people. And worse than that, it was missing the point.

"Were the people made for the Sabbath – or was the Sabbath made for the people?" He asked. "Yes, God set the Sabbath aside as a day of rest. It was suppose to be a well-earned recess after a week of hard labor. It was God's gift to us. It wasn't meant to crush us with a thousand minute laws. If you're hungry, go ahead and eat. If your ox is in a ditch, pull him out. If you see a need, go ahead and meet it."

So he cured a man with a withered hand. Why? That's a no-brainer. He cured a man with a withered hand because the man had a withered hand. Was Jesus working when he did it? Sure He was. It was His line of work. It was a need right there and right then. It all took place in the Church of What's Happening Now.

And we're told the old-timers were furious because they couldn't stand the thought of living, working, and worshiping in the "Church of What's Happening Now." It demanded too much. It was too risky. It was too uncertain.

After all, in the Church of What's Happening Now, you never knew who was going to walk through the door. It might be someone who's hungry. You can't feed the wretch, it's the Lord's Day. It might be someone who's sick or lame – a leper or an AIDs victim. Don't want people like that around – not on the Lord's Day. Why, some loutish commoner might walk in the back door and disrupt our worship of Almighty God with a request to help him get his ox out of a ditch before the poor ting died – can't do that, it's the Lord's Day. God wants us to pray and sing and read the Holy Book.

And Jesus said, "Hogwash! Get out there and feed the hungry! Cure the sick! Help the man! Do it now because the need is NOW!"

Now, when you all decide what kind of church Saint James is going to be, you have some options. You could, for example, choose to be The Church of What Was Happening Then." That's a church filled with people who don't merely learn from the past, they want to go back and live there. Old traditions mean more than new demands. Old successes are more important than new risks. The memory of old mistakes forces them into a closet of fear and timidity.

You won't see many young people in the Church of What Was Happening Then. Young people live in the present, and the church they want better live there too. Its worship, its education, its programs had better be a current witness, or they'll be out the door. Either they'll go somewhere else, or worse, they'll go nowhere at all.

The fact is, the Church of What Was Happening Then is not a dying church, it's already dead; it just doesn't know it.

There's a third option too. Let's call it The Church of What's Going to Happen Tomorrow." The people who live in that church aren't living in the past – they're waiting for some bright tomorrow to come along. They're at the edge of a canyon. On the other side is someone who needs help. On the other side are new possibilities: educational programs to be tried, worship to be experimented with, volunteers to be recruited. The church stands poised and ready to jump but there's a sign on their side of the canyon that reads, "Look before you leap." They're doing an awful lot of looking, but not much leaping.

They say, "All we need is a few more members... a few more dollars in our treasury... a few more ideas to work over." People who live in the Church of What's Going to Happen Tomorrow have their hearts in the right place. They really do want to do something. They just don't have sufficient faith to get off their pews and actually do it.

So there you have it, three possibilities. Saint James can be any one of them. It can be the Church of What Happened Yesterday, it can be the Church of What's Gonna Happen Tomorrow, or it can follow the teachings of its Lord and be the Church of What's Happening Now: a strong, contemporary witness to the love and power of God; a church that's informed by the past, but not living in it; a church that cherishes a hope for a bright, effective tomorrow, but doesn't simply wait for that tomorrow to come; a church that's busy BEING the church.

As Brother Flip would say, "Amen to that, brothers and sisters. Amen!"