

SERMON – 09/23/07

Christianity’s Family Tree – Orthodoxy

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-10, 13-16, 12:1-2

My father is the historian in our family... and I mean that both practically and literally!

- He got a Masters degree in History... he taught history in high school at one time... and made a career out of being a National Park Service historian!
 - So it’s no surprise that he has been the one to piece together our “family tree”.
 - Because of his research, I know that I have ancestors John & Elizabeth Bissell, who emigrated from England to Plymouth Colony in 1628...
 - Or that my Great Great Grandmother (on my father’s side), Edna Voletta Craig, had a Scottish & French background (in fact, Jody and I had a chance to visit the town her father was born in – Eyemouth, Scotland!)
 - Or that my Great, Great, Great Grandfather, James White, Sr... married Phoebe Jane McCallum (not to be confused with Jody’s maiden name, **McCollum**) on New Year’s Day, 1869 in Blue Earth, MN.
- Family trees are amazing! We’re able to trace our heritage back across the generations...
 - They help us remember who we are, and where we’ve come...
 - They take into account some of the “quirky” DNA traits we may exhibit, and point to specific places where significant change occurred.
- Today we begin a new sermon series called “CHRISTIANITY’S FAMILY TREE – What Other Christians Believe and Why”...
 - Over the course of the next 8 weeks, we’re going to be looking at the Christian “family tree”... with the intent of getting to know ourselves better!
 - I have to give credit to the senior pastor of the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, Pastor Adam Hamilton...
 - Adam not only preached a similar series last year at his church, but also prepared a study guide for other pastors (like myself) to use...

- Over the course of this series, we're going to learn about church history, theology & Christian spirituality... and see what it is that makes each branch of our Christian family unique.
 - I'm not going to be telling you why United Methodists are the best...
 - There probably won't be much comparing & contrasting between the groups...
 - It also won't be a complete description & analysis of each denomination...
 - Instead, I hope to capture something of the unique personality of each of our brother and sister groups... and see what it is that we might be able to learn from them...
 - So our faith may be enriched and that we might be more authentic & effective disciples of Jesus Christ
 - The various Christian traditions will be presented roughly in the order in which they developed... to help us trace the growth of our family tree... (however, since I am a United Methodist pastor, I'll present Methodism last).

Christianity began as part of a movement within Judaism...

- Our scriptures, worship patterns & organizational structure were birthed in Judaism.
 - Then in the first century, as Christianity began to develop & incorporate more non-Jews, it became increasingly distinct from Judaism.
 - In the first few centuries, there were no distinctions among Christians.
 - We were known as Nazarenes (or followers of Jesus of Nazareth); followers of 'The Way'; Christians (followers of Jesus Christ).
- In the ensuing centuries, arguments over theology and practice led to great conflict within the church... whose leaders called together bishops from throughout the world to hash out the essentials of the faith we share.
 - 325AD: Nicaea... the Nicene Creed came from this (though the creed as we know it today contains significant additions made at a subsequent council, Constantinople (381AD)).
 - Despite this unity of belief, there were great differences between Christians in the eastern and western halves of the Roman empire.

- These differences were more cultural, philosophical & political than theological... but they were tearing the church apart.
- Emperor Constantine, who had reunited the Empire, appointed his sons to rule after his death... one, ruling from the traditional capital of Rome, was trying to ward off the continuing invasions of barbarians... the other ruled in the Greek-speaking capital city of Constantinople, considered the “new Rome.”
- Through the centuries, the contact between the halves of the old empire lessened & the gulf between the two widened...
- Questions about the relationships of the 4 major leaders of the Christian churches in the East (known as patriarchs) with its prince among churches in the West (known as the pope) were particularly thorny.
- While the patriarchs recognized the role of the pope as “first among equals,” they did not believe he had authority over their churches.
- Then in the 7th Century at a regional council in Toledo, Spain... western Christians added 3 little words to the Nicene Creed w/o consulting their eastern brothers & sisters... (*filioque* = “from the Son”), meaning the Holy Spirit descended not only from the Father, but also from the Son.
- The eastern church was outraged!
- In 1054, Pope Leo X and Patriarch Michael I both excommunicated each other and all the followers from each other’s churches... creating a division that remains today.
- Each church we’ll study sees Church history in a slightly different way...
 - Orthodox Christians believe they are the direct & continuous successors of the apostles... and that the Roman Catholic church, by adding to the creed, giving too much authority to the Pope, and changing liturgy, departed from the right path.
 - The Eastern Christians claimed the title “orthodox” which means “right worship” & “right beliefs.” The name makes a strong statement (implying others do not).
 - It’s explained this way on the website of the Greek Orthodox Church in Hawaii:

“The Orthodox Church is the true Church of God on earth and maintains the fullness of Christ's truth in continuity with the Church of the apostles.”

This awesome claim does not mean that Orthodox Christians have achieved perfection: for we have many personal shortcomings. Nor does it necessarily mean that the other Christian Churches do not serve God's purpose positively: for it is not up to us to judge others but to live and proclaim the fullness of the truth. But it does mean that if a person carefully examines the history of Christianity he or she will soon discover that the Orthodox Church alone is in complete sacramental, doctrinal and canonical continuity with the ancient undivided Church as it authoritatively expresses itself through the great Ecumenical Councils.”
(Father Theodore Stylianopoulos)

- Today, Eastern Orthodoxy makes up the 2nd largest body of Christians after the Roman Catholic Church.
- It's difficult to obtain an exact figure – but estimates range anywhere from 95 million to 300 million members!

One of the parts of this sermon series that I'm most excited about is the opportunity I'll have to meet with and interview leaders of the various denominations...

- A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of visiting the congregation of **Saints Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church of Honolulu**.
 - Located on Lunalilo Street, close to Ward Ave., and just above the freeway... this congregation has close to 100 families connected to it.
 - I was graciously welcomed by Father Demetrius T. Dogias, the current interim pastor of the Greek Orthodox Church.
- I sat down with Father Demetrius, and asked him what it meant to be an Orthodox Christian...
 - He said they follow the “**traditional faith**”... that they claim to carry on the traditions of Christ in an unbroken tie, directly from the Near East.
 - “We don't change unless we're really sure of something,” he added!

- They're tied to their **ethnic identities**... primarily either Greek, Russian or Serbian (though that's changing a bit in the US, as Orthodox churches are starting to have more unity among them!).
- They observe 7 **sacraments**... or means of grace by which God enters their lives & makes them holy...
- In my studies this week, I learned that baptism by immersion (or underwater baptism) marks the beginning of Christian life – even for infants... followed by an anointing with oil (making one a full member after baptism!).
- Among the first acts after baptism is the Eucharist (or Holy Communion), with a drop of wine even being placed on an infants' tongue!
- The **Nicene Creed** is central to their theology, and their **liturgy** is over a thousand years old!
- I asked Father Demetrius to talk more about their ancient liturgy... and how their worship shapes their identity as Christians.
 - “It’s holistic,” he said. “When you come into an orthodox church You enter the **real world**... There are icons to see, music to listen to, incense to smell – all your senses are engaged as you are surrounded by the world of God.”
 - “God is here in this place,” he told me. “Everything in the sanctuary teaches about Christ!”
 - I found out that this particular orthodox congregation moved into an existing building vacated by another denomination in 1988... so they had to work with the building they were given.
 - However, orthodox churches usually have domed sanctuaries... reminding people of the heavenly realm of God.
 - There’s always an icon or mosaic of Christ watching over the congregation... reminding everyone of God’s constant presence in our lives.
 - They celebrate Holy Communion weekly... it’s part of what they call The Divine Liturgy... “Our worship is biblical, and everything we do is for the veneration of God,” Father Demetrius said.

- As you can see, icons have a prominent role in the orthodox tradition. But they are something we United Methodists are largely unaware of...
 - When I asked him about it, Father Demetrius quickly said, “We don’t worship icons – we only worship the Father, Son & Holy Spirit.
 - “But icons are ‘helpmates.’ They show humanity, yes... but they also reveal the spiritual reality around us! You’ll notice we have no statues or 3D images in our churches. That’s intentional.”
- Another important element of Orthodox faith is the influence of the early church Fathers... the men & women who shaped the first few centuries of the faith.
 - Orthodox believe the Holy Spirit was guiding the early church, so Christians from the first 5-7 centuries were important in their **interpretation** of Scripture.
 - “If the Spirit hadn’t been with them,” says Father Dogias, “we never would have remembered them like we do today!”
 - He explained to me that the early church fathers (& mothers!) are very well known to Orthodox Christians... they’re the saints that have gone before.
 - “We have feast days to commemorate them. We carry their names (my name, Demetrius, is from one of the saints). Our clergy speak and talk about them.”
- He told me about the two saints their church was named after – Constantine and Helen...
 - Constantine was the Roman Emperor who lived a wild life prior to becoming a Christian...
 - However, he officially ended the state-sanctioned persecution of Christians in 313AD...
 - He built the city of Constantinople (originally calling it “New Rome”)...
 - And he was in his 40’s when he publically announced that he himself had become a Christian.
- Helen was his mother... a very devout woman, who is most remembered for her role in finding the lost cross of Jesus!

- Around the year 330AD, when she was 80 years old, she went on a 1,400+ mile trek to Jerusalem to find the cross of Christ, which had been missing for centuries.
 - Her archeological team uncovered 3 crosses near the place where Jesus was crucified...
 - Helen wanted to make sure she got the right cross, so legend has it that she laid a sick person on each of the three crosses... and only when the last one brought him healing did she know it was the true cross.
 - Another legend says there was sweet basil growing around the cross of Jesus (and not the other two)...
 - A few weeks ago, on Friday, September 7th, the Orthodox church celebrated the Feast of the “Elevation of the Cross,” when they recall Saint Helen’s momentous deed!
- To worship in a sanctuary where reminders of the saints of the church are visibly present brings new meaning to the scripture passage from Hebrews that we read earlier...
 - *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)*
 - That, my friends, is what our brothers and sisters in the Orthodox tradition experience each and every week in the “real world” of their sanctuaries.
 - United Methodist pastor, Adam Hamilton, writes this: “There are so many things in this world that challenge your faith and draw you away from God. And you start thinking this little world is all there is. The Orthodox Church reminds us of the importance of gathering to remember the real world. And that produces faith.”

- How might our faith be different if we felt as though when we walked into this sanctuary, we were walking into the REAL WORLD of God's presence?
 - How would you live differently if you knew absolutely and without question that God was constantly by your side?
 - How would you look at illness, pain, sorrow & tragedy if you had actually seen heaven and knew it was more real than anything you'd seen on earth?
 - How would you react to temptation if you believed without question that Jesus watches over you; that this life is only temporary; and that the saints stand around you, cheering you on?
 - These are all gifts that our relatives in the Orthodox Church bring to the table of Christianity...
 - May God give us grace to see, hear, touch, taste & smell the glorious reality of the Kingdom of God here in this place... each & every week! AMEN.