

You're a Wizard, Harry **Genesis 25:24-34; Ephesians 4:1-6**

This past summer we ended our weeklong Senior High mission trip, by going to see the last Harry Potter movie. It seems strange to me that this has come to an end because as a youth group we have gone to see six of these movies together while on different trips, but even more, because for over ten years now Harry Potter has been an important part of our young people's lives. I say our young people, but in actuality, there are a lot of adults who have read all the books and seen all the movies as well.

The other day I asked some in our group what it is about this series that hooked them so, and their answers were varied. Some just really like the fantasy and adventure aspect of it all with wizards, trolls, dragons, and magic. Others talked about this being the ultimate battle between good and evil and the message that they received that if you are fighting for what is right, it doesn't matter if you are weaker or smaller or younger than your opponent, somehow somehow, you will win. Personally, I still say that Luke Skywalker vs. Darth Vader is the ultimate example of good vs. evil, but that is a topic for another sermon some other time.

But the biggest reason that they gave for their interest in Harry Potter is that they can relate to the characters. Even though the main characters are wizards, they face a lot of the same things that we face with trying to build and maintain relationships, trying to do what is right when it is often easier to just go along with the crowd and do what feels good or makes us happy, and wrestling with who we are and who we are becoming.

Now if you have read the books or seen the movies, this next part of my sermon will make perfect sense. If not, hopefully I won't confuse you too much.

Early in the first movie, we learn that as a baby Harry Potter's parents were killed and so he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle. But on his eleventh birthday Hagrid who, as best as I can describe him, is a giant wizard, shows up to take Harry to Hogwarts, which is a school for wizards. When it is clear that Harry doesn't understand what is going on, Hagrid looks at him and says, "You're a wizard Harry."

And with those words the journey begins...

I've been reading a lot of books lately which examine the faith of today's young people... essentially youth and young adults from around age 16 to 29. And these books, through their studies, have asked how young people today view Christianity and the Church along with their involvement or avoidance of them. In one of these books, Soul Searching by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is introduced. This term is how they have chosen to describe what they consider to be the common religious belief among American young people today. And the essentials of this belief are that: A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth. And this God wants people to be good and nice to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. But God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. In other words, God is like a therapist or a doctor whom we go to only when we think we

need help. Further, the central goal of life is to simply be happy and to feel good about oneself, and if you are a good person, when you die you get to go to heaven.

In their research, what they have found is that this belief system does offer comfort, it bolsters self esteem, it helps solve problems and encourages interpersonal relationships by encouraging people to do good and feel good, but in the end, it requires no real commitment to God or to God's mission in this world. In fact, it is kind of assumed that one will keep God at an arm's length.

Kendra Creasy Dean in her book Almost Christian, comes to the conclusion that young people today have adopted this belief or understanding of what it means to be a Christian because this is what they have seen modeled in their parents and other adults in the churches where they attend.

In fact, Dean says that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in American Churches today.

This is not to say that this is where our young people are or that this is where any of us in this church are... for that matter, but rather to ask the question, "What does it mean for you to call yourself a Christian?" With the underlying question, "Does Church still matter?"

This morning you heard the story of how Esau came in from the fields after a hard day's work, and he was hot, worn out, and hungry. And so when he smelled the stew which was cooking, he tells Jacob to give him some. But Jacob tosses out a condition, "First sell me your birthright." Esau says, "I'm dying here. What use is my birthright to me?" So he trades his birthright for the stew.

Can you blame Esau? He was tired and hungry... and it is clear that his birthright really doesn't matter that much to him anyway.

What we learn is that Esau is willing to sacrifice part of who he is to satisfy what he wants and desires in that moment. He gives up his birthright because he was tired... because he was hungry... because in that moment, it was more important for him to satisfy those feelings of hunger and of being tired. In the moment, how willing are we to sacrifice who we are?

Dean says, "Esau is a lot like us. Like Esau, American Christians tend to think with our stomachs, devouring whatever smells good in order to keep our inner rumblings at bay, oblivious even to our own misgivings. Sociologists paint American Christians as restless people who come to church for the same reasons people once went to diners: for someone to serve us who knows our name and for a filling stew that reminds us of home and makes us feel loved."

But shouldn't God... shouldn't the church mean more to us than a visit to the diner? Too often we treat our relationship with God as a kind of afterthought that doesn't really matter. It is inconsequential. God watches over us, but God makes no demands on our lives. And going to Church becomes something that we do out of a sense of duty when it is convenient for us.

Bruce Reyes Chow one of our past PCUSA General Assembly Moderators speaking during this past summer's Montreat Youth Conferences said that for many of us, when we order our lives and our schedules, what we give to God in the end is our

leftovers. After we do those things that are most important to us, we give God what we can spare. For many of us, God and the Church have become little more than an extracurricular activity.

What does it mean for you to be a Christian? Does your relationship with God matter?

I almost hate to share this but about twelve years ago, Steve Vance, who was one of the pastors here at the time, asked if I would assist him with an Ash Wednesday worship service... reading a few prayers and scripture. But Vance also had something special he wanted to do in this service. Some of you may have been here for this service. Near the end of it, he told everyone that they should come forward to him first for the imposition of ashes, then go to a basin filled with water, dip their hands in the water and then come to me. My job was to dry everyone's hands and say to them, "Remember your baptism." But in Vance's explanation he said something along the lines of, "While you have heard a lot of important words this evening the most important words are yet to come. Steve Phillips has the most important words for you this night."

Immediately, I could feel a chill go up my spine. I had the most important words? All I was supposed to say was, "Remember your baptism". And so my mind began to race... what more could I say? How could I make my words sound as important as Vance was making them out to be?

And so the congregation came forward. They went to Vance, then to the basin, and then to me. I dried their hands, looked into their faces, and in as reverent a voice as I could manage I said, "Remember your baptism." To my surprise, most smiled knowingly and confidently... turning to walk away renewed by the service. But there were a few who, like me at the time, just didn't get it. After I said, "Remember your baptism," they stood staring at me. After about twenty seconds or so I would finally say, "And that's it."

On Sunday mornings when we have a baptism, we all stand up and we promise that we will help to teach this child the Good News of the Gospel and that we will help to strength his or her family ties with the household of God, but have you ever really listened to the first part of the baptismal service?

It talks about God's promise to forgive our sins. It talks about God joining us together as brothers and sisters in Christ. It talks about sharing in Christ's victory and being raised with him to new life. But two themes that are repeated throughout this but also throughout the Bible are that God has claimed us to be his own and that God is with us always.

Do you know that God is present with you right now? Do you live your life... do we live our lives knowing that God is with us always not just when we think we need him? Does this matter to you? Is your life any different because God has claimed you for himself?

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, when he felt completely discouraged and lost, would touch his fingers to his forehead and repeat to himself: I am baptized, I am baptized, I am baptized. Because no matter what happened, he knew who he belonged to. He knew that he was graced. He knew that he was loved. And that made all the difference.

Turning to our Ephesians passage, there is some discussion as to who wrote this letter, with most believing that it was probably written by the Apostle Paul while he was in prison. The bigger question though is to whom was this letter actually written? For various reasons, scholars do not believe that it was written specifically to the church in Ephesus, but rather that it was written to all the Eastern Churches with the idea that it would be passed around from church to church because this letter was written with the intention of unifying all people and all things under and in Christ. This letter was sent to all the Churches in an attempt to identify the main task of Christians and the Church as being Christ's body in the world and an instrument in reconciling all people to one another and to God.

When we come to our specific verses in the 4th chapter, a lot of people have assumed that Paul is speaking primarily to ordained leaders in the church but what we find is that he is speaking to the entire body of the church... to you and to me... to all those who consider themselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Paul says, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

What this part of the letter is talking about is our vocation as Christians. Vocation is more than a job or an occupation or a career. Vocation refers to those things that help to shape who we are and what our lives are really about. Vocation gives meaning, integrity, and purpose to our lives. Vocation is how we live our lives in response to God who loves us, cares for us and claims us as his own. Vocation is our response to the call to be in partnership with God in this world, and so it involves our lives in relation to our friends, our families, our love relationships, and our marriages. It asks how we live in community, what we do to care for those in need, how we work for justice and for the common good. Vocation asks what we do in our times of leisure to renew ourselves. It asks how we participate in the religious community? How do we worship, pray, study, and serve one another. Vocation asks about our work both voluntary and/or paid. Vocation asks how being claimed by God and being in partnership with God who is with us always shapes who we are?

Paul says, "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." I find that word "beg" to be very interesting. Paul doesn't just ask that we lead a life worthy of our calling... he doesn't hope that we will, he doesn't think this is simply a good idea... Paul seems to know that our success as individual Christians but also as Christians joined together as the Church is dependent upon our living lives worthy of our calling so much so that he begs us to do it.

When Hagrid says, "You're a wizard, Harry." Harry responds saying, "You've made a mistake. I can't be a wizard. I'm just Harry... just Harry." But Harry goes with him anyway, and he slowly learns his history, he learns about his family, and he learns what it means to be a wizard. He learns about the commitment that it will take... the time

and effort that it will require... and the sacrifices that he will need to make in his life. And as we watch his story unfold before us, we see Harry making decisions not only thinking of himself, but also thinking of others... his friends, his classmates, his teachers, and even those whom he has never even met because he is in a position to make a difference in the world for good or for bad. As we watch the movies or read the books, we find that being a wizard is what gives Harry's life meaning and purpose because he fully commits himself and his life to this, and that commitment has shaped and defined who he is.

What does it mean for you to be a Christian?

Too often God's plan for our lives goes unnoticed because we have learned to keep God at an arm's length only calling upon him in our times of need. Too often God's plan for our lives is ignored because it runs counter to the things that we think we want and need for our lives. Too often we forget that we are not here for ourselves but that we have been invited to join with God in taking up Christ's mission to the world. We want our faith to be easy. We want our relationship with God to be convenient. But if God crosses every boundary of life and of death of space and of time to be with us... to claim us as his own and if God has called us to be in partnership with him, then following Jesus Christ will be anything but convenient. As Dean says, "Jesus Christ doesn't tinker; he tears down walls, draws up new plans, makes demands on our lives: 'Have no other gods before me. Love one another as I have loved you. Leave your nets, and follow me.'"

Being a Christian should give our lives meaning and purpose. It should define who we are. But for that to happen, we need to give our lives: our time, our schedules, our relationships, our activities... our entire beings to God... living lives worthy of our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

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October 23, 2011