

Sermon # 3 What is a Progressive Christian? (Summary of first 3, covering 4 and 5) August 16, 2009, Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Hall, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO

We are looking at what it means to be a progressive Christian.

In the first sermon we learned that a progressive Christian is one who has found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus. There is an absence of language pertaining to “salvation.” The focus is on following Jesus’ life of hospitality, compassion, service, sacrifice, wholeness and balance, and not on the doctrinal “savior” language formulated in the 4th Century by the church. When the early Christians gathered they did so to remember the life and teachings of Jesus. This doesn’t mean we don’t see Jesus as one’s savior, but rather one can be a Christian by considering oneself a follower of Jesus’ teachings and using his life, as a model.

The second point we considered was that a progressive Christian recognizes the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God’s realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us. God is too large and too mysterious to be encapsulated in one way only. After all, we came out of the Hebrew faith tradition, as Jesus was a Jew, and the Moslems through Mohammad worship the same God, Allah, as we in the Judeo-Christian tradition do. Today far greater faith is required to seek and trust that which is infinite and beyond our comprehension. Today to retain a faith in the face of the great mystery can be a challenge. I shared the story of Swami Vivenkenda in which religion is like a large body of water. Each of us comes to the lake with our containers and dips it in. The water takes the shape of the container.

The third point was shared as we gathered around God’s table of welcome and hospitality. The banquet of love and welcome is seen when all nations, tribes and clans of the earth are God’s guests. No one is excluded. A Progressive Christian is acting out of a long tradition and a fundamental expression of God’s love, the heart of Jesus’ life, and teachings.

Today we will consider two more points by asking two questions.

1. Can you think of a type of person who might make you uncomfortable if one sat next to you during a church service?

Now this might seem strange and out of place particularly since we just talked about the communion experience is an invitation for all people to come to God’s table. In this fourth point we do take an extra step by inviting all people to join us as “full partners” in the common life without asking them or imposing on them that they become like us. Instead we are to become like Jesus, following the teachings and life, and humbling ourselves to being a servant. There are churches that claim to welcome all, yet may expect people to believe as they do: doubters and skeptics will become believers; gays and lesbians will become straight or at least, celibate, everyone will appear to be cheerful, and all people in the church will adopt the same manners and similar tastes.

We in the United Church of Christ have designations such as Open and Affirming, Whole Earth, Just Peace, Multi-cultural Church among others. I now would like to do away with some of these classifications, but realize that it may not be possible, except through a clearly defined statement of who and what the church is, which will be short, memorable and poignant. Salem is working on that.

A progressive Christian conclude the followers of Jesus are to welcome all people without imposing on them the necessity of changing their attitudes, culture, understanding of the faith, or their sexual orientation. In fact members of a church should be alert to the possibility that it is they who must be transformed.

In short, each of us carries with us biases, prejudices, events that have made us who we are. Sometimes it is the style of worship, type of music, length of the sermon. It is one thing to welcome a new person to our church and worship service. But it is quite another to create a place, a feeling that welcomes the stranger into full partnership where we are willing to share ideas, decision making and risks. We might learn something about the God who is seeking us out to be the faithful community where diversity is experienced.

**This leads us to the 5th point which is lifted up by our asking the question:
2. How do we deal with our differences in a healthy and positive way?**

How often have we used the phrase: actions speak louder than words. I learn more about Jesus in the scriptures from the things that he does rather than from the words that he speak. Jesus is a man of action, he heals, he forgives, he demonstrates compassion, he stakes a stand against injustices, he shares, he weeps, and he loves unconditionally. Then he tells his disciples to do the same thing.

For the progressive Christian the Great Commandment is the litmus test: love God with all of our heart, soul and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus never said, “You must have the right belief, but always to do some action. To the rich man, he said follow the code and give up his wealth, the priests were told to give up their hypocrisy. It is easier to debate theology than it is to follow the teachings, for this would require a significant change in our behavior.

Progressive Christians don’t demand that new members change to mirror the existing core beliefs of the membership of a church. What is important is how we act toward each other with respect and kindness. We may not all agree. We do disagree, but we do so, with respect. The ultimate is does this act reflect the God who is still speaking in love? Genuine love is acting in a manner that enhances another’s well being, even at a cost to oneself.

I have now been with you over a year. We celebrated our first anniversary August 1 and on Sunday, August 2, we celebrated communion. In this time I have observed that Salem is more action oriented. The overall belief at work is at the top of the bulletin: “in all things, Love.”

We need to remember that we are all different; we have here believers and agnostics, men, women, children, all races and cultures, classes and abilities, those who have journeyed with God in Christ for years and those who are just beginning; those who have hope and those who have lost hope; those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, conventional Christians and unconventional Christians. We are united in serving and loving God and our neighbor. We are on a journey with God who is continually a mystery yet calling us to be a model of welcome as seen in our words and acts of encouragement to each other and this is most important, as well as to God’s world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

(The 8 points of the Progressive Christian can be found at The Center for Progressive Christianity Website, www.tcpc.org) Rev. Hall is a member of the organization.