

Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Awareness of the World | Genesis 22:18

We are, today, finishing a look at what makes us, not unique, but distinctive. What are our values? All churches worship and study the Scriptures, all churches fellowship and pray, but what we have tried to establish here is a community that has some DNA to it, some values. And today we will talk about the last of those values. Frankly, it was here long before John and Laura Crosby ever knew that there was a place called Christ Presbyterian. For decades, it has been apparent that once you're here—and even from the outside—a core value of this community is an awareness of the world, and that we are a part of a bigger world. We are aware of the world because there's more to life than us. And right from the start, this has been a “to whom much has been given” community and we have tried to take that seriously, even when we don't take ourselves that seriously. We believe that an awareness of the world is a value that's grounded in the story that God tells—the story of God—from the very beginning of creation to the first time that specific people called that peculiar God their God. So the story starts in the Book of Genesis with a guy named Abram who becomes Abraham because God calls him, and he spends decades following God. The very deepest pit God ever takes him into is a place that is ironically on top of a mountain. God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac to the top of the mountain and offer him as a sacrifice. To show that he trusts God, Abraham does it. He binds his son on the altar and is just about to kill him when God intervenes. At the very last second, God spares Isaac by putting in another, a substitute sacrifice. And God turns to Abraham, and he doesn't say, “Now you've passed the test; now you get the prize.” He says, “Now you know what faith looks like.” And this is what happens when you are faithful. From Genesis 22:

¹⁶I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you

and that blessing goes like this,

¹⁷and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.

number one...

Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies

number two, and most important, number three,

¹⁸Through your offspring all nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me. [Genesis 22:16-18]

We are the spiritual children of Abraham. We follow that same peculiar God and that means we are to be the blessing ones. Not the judging ones, not the good ones; we are to be the ones who bless this world God loves. So, let me just talk for a minute about what blessing is not, because sometimes we think blessing looks like this political program or this specific non-profit. It is not that at all. Blessing is not tied to a political position. We learned that this weekend.

Yesterday when Justice Scalia was buried, it was very clear that he was a rock-ribbed conservative, and that he was a rock-ribbed follower of Jesus. That to his core, his very Catholic soul, he trusted in Jesus. And he said, "If there's one thing I would want you to know it's this, God assumed from the beginning that the wise of the world would view Christians as fools, and God has not been disappointed." In other words, we are looking like fools. Scalia said, "If I have brought any message today, it is this: Have the courage to have your wisdom regarded as stupidity. Be fools for Christ. And have the courage to suffer the contempt of the sophisticated world." That's powerful. What made it powerful for me is that I read that not from a rock-ribbed conservative Christian, I read that from a pinko, liberal, longhair activist. His name is Shane Claiborne. His dreadlocks run down to his waist. He never met a protest he didn't want to be involved in, and he posted Scalia's comment. He said, "Christianity is at its best when it is precarious, and marginalized, suffering, and it is at its worst when it is popular, credible, triumphal, and powerful." He too is a fool for Christ. People who bless the earth have a foolish perspective on the world. Blessing is not a political position. Blessing is also not ringing our hands and saying, "Oh the world is going to hell in a hand basket. Everything is ruined and broken." Christians ought to be the ones who say God made it good and we are to lift up beauty, whether that is painting, or beautiful music, or architecture, or a giraffe raising its long neck on the planes of Africa. We are to say, "Yes, God!" but we are also to say, "Oh God" when we see the broken things.

So the third thing that the blessing can never be is that the blessing can never be disconnected from the people of God, disconnected from the church. Many people who are atheists and agnostics and members of other religions can do many good things, that's not it at all, but when God says *I will make you a blessing* it's because we are connected to God. That's part of what it is and sometimes it takes somebody who is not a Christian to see that.

For decades Nicholas Kristof, the Op-Ed writer, would not have been described as a friend of Christians. He's a Jew, he's a secular Jew, he's a progressive, he sees Christians as the conservative ones, but then he wrote this:

“Today, among urban Americans and Europeans, ‘evangelical or Christian’ is sometimes a synonym for ‘rube.’ In liberal circles, evangelical Christians constitute one of the few groups that it’s safe to mock openly. Yet, the liberal caricature of the orthodox Christian is complete and unfair.”

And he says this—I love it:

“I have little in common, politically or theologically, with orthodox Christians, but I’ve been truly awed by those I’ve seen in so many remote places, combating illiteracy and warlords, famine and disease, humbly struggling to do the Lord’s work as they see it

That’s the blessing, doing the Lord’s work as they see it . And Kristof says:

and it is offensive to see these good people derided. I must say that a disproportionate share of the aid workers I’ve met in the wildest places over the years, long after everyone sensible has left, have been Christians, evangelicals, and nuns or priests.”

Kristof tells the story of Dr. Stephen Foster, a grown child of Christian missionaries who’s given his life to care for the poor and sick in Angola. He does so sincerely and with such selflessness that Kristof says, “He redefines for me what a Christian is.” When you see a follower of Jesus blessing the world it changes your view of Christians, but more importantly, it changes your view of Jesus. That’s why you cannot bless apart from Jesus.

So, let me define what a blessing is. John Ortberg says it well. He says, “To bless is to give life.” Especially where it’s missing. When you bless somebody you give life. Mark Buchanan, another pastor, says, “Blessing is very connected to love.” He asked a group of kids the question, “What is love?” And Rebecca, age eight, said, “When my grandma got arthritis, she couldn’t bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather did this for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis, too.” This is blessing. Billy, age four, said, “When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know your name is safe in their mouth.” What a great phrase. You know that your name is safe in their mouth. That’s blessing. So I guess, whose toenails are you painting? Whose name is safe in your mouth? Who are you blessing?

I have to tell you, I think this community has taught me much about what blessing is like. And one of the things that Abraham realized is that you cannot bless what you will not see. Abraham couldn’t see how God would get him out of this. You cannot bless what you will not see. Christians have to see the world differently.

I was in Bangkok last week for a short World Vision International board meeting, and just because of the schedule, I had one night where I was alone for dinner. I’m in a nice

part of Bangkok, not near the Red Light District at all, and I walked about four blocks from the hotel to a great park in Bangkok and then over to dinner. In the four blocks between the hotel and the park, I probably was stopped five, six, seven, eight times by little girls. "Want a good time? I can give you a good time!" And some of them looked like they were eight or nine-years-old. And others looked like the most beautiful women I have ever seen in my life. "Want a good time?" The story was made even worse by the fact that many of them were saying, "Want a good time, grandpa?" But that's another story for another day. And the thing that struck me was that they saw that I was American so they were stopping me, but people were flooding by them on the sidewalks. They were invisible, and I was just struck by *this is my little girl here! This is somebody's daughter*. Nobody wakes up in the morning saying, "Oh Lord Jesus, let me become a prostitute." Just doesn't happen. And it will not stop unless God's people see how they can bless where the world is broken.

The second thing that I would say about blessing that I think our community has learned is that blessing the world has to be about re-establishing the Kingdom of heaven on earth. In other words, it is not about doing good works. We are not the YMCA, which has turned into the Y. We say this is because this is the God that we serve. We look for God at work. Hear that. We look for God at work and want to go and try to bless that. We are reformed Christians because we feel that God is throwing us into the mix and saying *help me fix it* as opposed to *get away from that terrible world and I'll save you!*

Abraham Kuyper was a Dutch theologian in the Netherlands, but he also became the Prime Minister of the Netherlands because he believed he was supposed to get into the battle instead of running away. Kuyper changed my life when I read his words. He wrote, "There is not one square foot of planet earth that my King Jesus does not come and say, 'This is Mine! This is Mine! No more letting sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground, this is Mine.'" That's what it means to be aware of the world and to bless all the nations. I want to close by asking, what does that look like here in beautiful Minnesota? And instead of telling you, I'd like to show you what it looks like.

[Video shown: To watch these six stories on local and global awareness, please go to:
livestream.com/cpc]

You know what I love? I love that the hardest part of this was just stopping at six stories. We have dozens and dozens and dozens of other folks who would love to talk about how their awareness of the world has helped them become a blessing and how they have been blessed themselves. This is a value of ours that shines when it's healthy, but as with all of our values, as a community we are nowhere near where we should be in embracing the church. There are too many more whose toenails need to be painted, whose name needs to be safe in our mouth, but by the grace of God we are on the road together, and it's a great joy and life-giving journey. It started back in Genesis with Abraham. You know where that journey ends? It ends in the Book of Revelation; the

end of the story on this planet. The apostle John looks at the end of the world and this is what he sees:

⁹After this I looked, and before me there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹²saying, "Amen! Praise and glory, and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" [Revelation 7:9-12]

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You have started this journey with us. I pray that this will stir in each of our hearts the invitation to be aware of the world and to see what others don't. To bless others in the everyday as well as the extraordinary. To see You going before us and giving us the courage to live your kingdom here on the earth. Amen.

If for you, this has been one of the words that has left you feeling like *I could use somebody to talk to about this; I'd love for somebody to pray with me about this burden*, as we go out into the Great Room, why don't you just stop over here? We'd love to hear your story and pray with you.

As we talked about this Capital Campaign, many of you said, "Did I miss the bus?" Don't worry, your chance is coming. All through this week—Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday—you should be receiving in the mail an Invited commitment card. We ask that you bring it back to church, and as you are lead, participate with us in this joyful, life-giving thing that God invites us to.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.