

Decorate Your World
February 9th, 2014

Galatians 6:7-10
Epiphany 5 A

Pastor James Mattek

A few short months ago each of us decorated our home for Christmas. Decorating for Christmas however is not simply something we do with pretty ornaments. We are really to decorate our lives with deeds that exhibit a sincere faith that lives inside of us. That is how we as Christians are to decorate our lives. Your church decorates not only for the holidays but it has a wonderful ministry that goes on here that helps people, pilgrims on their way to heaven. That is how this church decorates itself with deeds that please the Lord. As Individuals, we as people are to decorate our lives with deeds of that show that we are connected directly to the Lord and rooted in his word.

John the Baptizer addressed that. He said "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance". In other words, assuming that everybody is like a tree rooted in the ground, if you are rooted in the Lord it will not produce just any fruit but fruit that shows that you are connected to the Lord. And he called out Pharisees and Sadducees who on the outside appear to be producing fruit and keeping with repentance but he called them a bunch of snakes. Jesus called them out as well, whitewashed tombs. On the outside you look really good, on the inside you are dead. The apostle Paul put it this way, "Be not deceived, God cannot be mocked". In other words, realize that you might be able to fool people with how you put on a show of Christianity but by that show is to be rooted in the Lord and when it isn't our Lord knows.

The ministry that I serve in at Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service, you might say, decorates itself as well with deeds that help people in the area of senior care and in the area of counseling people.

This morning let's just look at the concept of decorating our lives in general and let's do what I would call a spiritual gut check on ourselves to see whether or not they are sincere, whether or not they are simply a show and to really kind of go back and understand how it is that we are capable in the first place of producing fruits in keeping with repentance. The apostle Paul put it this way. He said "You reap what you sow". Anybody can understand that whether you are old or young. It's a farming expression. It's a gardening expression. You will get what it is you plant. And so it is spiritually as well. He said if you plant to please only your sinful nature, well guess what? Your life will produce things that are destructive now and also forever. But when God intervenes in our life and gives us faith, giving us a holy spirit, we are able to do things to plant in our lives things which please the spirit and from that spirit receive only positive things, now and also forever in heaven. My Mother put it this way when I was a little boy and maybe you can relate, I can still remember like it was yesterday. "James, you made your bed now..." You know how it goes, right, now sleep in it. So let's take a peak. Let's take a peek at what it means to decorate our lives, what it means to decorate our lives for Christmas.

What I am going to do this morning is to go back in my ministry to many years ago to an actual event or a case that occurred. I will change the names, as is appropriate, but you will be able to understand the point with the names being changed. I remember getting a phone call from somebody I had never met and I am going to call his name Cory. And Cory said over the phone "Pastor Mattek, I got your name and phone number from somebody, you don't know me, I don't know you but they said you could maybe help us. I am newly married and I am having difficulty with my wife, could you come over?" And I said sure, as would your pastor. And when I went to their apartment, just before I rang the door bell I could tell that there was some trouble going on inside from the sound of things. And then Corey opened the door for me and from down the hall I could tell there was major trouble going on and before he walked down the hall, he kind of summarized their situation. And he said the problem is my wife. And I'm think to myself, Ya I've heard that before but I did not share that of course. And he said you know she was raised in a really good family, she graduated from high school with honors, she got an academic scholarship for the local university but in the university, she kind of met up with a bad crowd and she began to abuse alcohol and other substances. She eventually got herself pregnant and had an abortion to the glorification of the devil. I am thinking to myself, ok, and you saw in her what? But of course I didn't say that, you meet people where they are at, don't we? And so he ushered me down the hallway to the bedroom and we'll call her name Kelly. And there she was on the bed thrashing uncontrollably, screaming and shouting and begging and pleading for the voices that she was hearing to go away. And frankly, I did not know what to do. And I so I did the first thing that came to my mind and I said "In the name of God's son Jesus, get out of here." And she quieted down.

Talk about somebody who had been sowing to please the sinful nature and from that nature was reaping destruction. So I don't know your story and you don't know my story but everybody here in this church has a story. And it might not be a dramatic as Kelly's. But our story is no less real and no less serious. There was a time when you and I were not under the umbrella of God's grace. There was a time when you and I did not have the spirit of God in us. Maybe it was at the moment we were born or maybe it was later or for much of our early life or maybe you came to know Jesus lately. You know your story. But the Bible is crystal clear about our condition. I was sinful from birth, sinful

from the time my mother conceived me. The sinful mind is not neutral toward God but the Bible says the sinful mind is hostile to God. I was born dead in my transgressions and in my sins. I was once in darkness the bible said. And so you know your story. I know mine. You know where it is that God finally came into your life. Maybe it was early, maybe it was mid-life, maybe it was later but somewhere along the line we certainly were without God's favor and in need of his intervention just like Kelly.

I don't know how Corey did it but he did it. He convinced Kelly to come to one of my adult membership classes. And she was not a willing participant. I can still recall the first class in the evening, the people coming through the door and here's Cory and Kelly. I'm handing out the booklets and if looks could kill, I would be dead. She refused to open up her book. Corey told me later that she had been referring in those days to me as that evil holy man but she was there. And she was hearing the word of God. I think it was after about 6 weeks that that hateful gaze in her eyes disappeared and her book was open finally. And then a few weeks later she asked her first question, and not long after that she answered a question, and not long after that she confessed her faith in Jesus as her Savior.

The power of the word of God, the power of the message of God's love that provided for her a Savior from all of her sins and a place for her in his family and someday forever in his heaven. The power of that message is used by the Holy Spirit to knock down her wall of resistance and finally he did it and he waltzed right into her heart and made her heart his temple. That's what the Holy Spirit did. Praise the Lord.

And once again, I don't know how God worked in your life, you don't know how he's worked in my life but there are many similarities even though it might not be quite that dramatic. Somehow God had to come into our life. He had to intervene. He had to shed the light of his gospel into our darkness. Work with me on this one but sometimes I like to picture the message of Jesus as sort of being like the hound dogs of God. And we'll call those hound dogs Goodness and Mercy. They have a good nose and they have a loud yelp. And maybe they were on our trail for a long, long time before they finally caught up with us. But you can hear them in the distance. And what you heard in the distance may be in your life was a message that maybe you learned on your mother's knee but eventually kind of abandoned. Maybe that message was something like Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so. Or maybe it was a Christian teacher that taught you or your confirming pastor that made such a spiritual impact on you and got through to you like almost nobody else could about Jesus, your need for Jesus and his love for you as the Savior. Or maybe it was a Christmas carol that you learned and loved as a child and maybe you drifted away and that this time of the year you can hear that howl of the hounds of God in the distance in the words of those carols that come over the radio or are maybe are heard in the mall about how God so loved the world that he did something about it by sending his one and only Son as the Christ child to be your Savior and the Savior of the world.

Somehow the hounds of God did not give up on you. They stayed on your trail. Goodness and Mercy were pursuing you all the days of your life and here you are in the house of the Lord and someday you will be in the house of the Lord in heaven forever. God works that way.

But Kelly still had trouble. The trouble she had surrounded the topics of guilt and shame. Guilt and shame can be powerful forces in a person's life. I can still hear her through the tears lamenting out loud in my office "I can't believe I did that" or "How can God love me?" Guilt and shame are powerful forces and if you have never felt guilt and shame, I guess shame on you. Each one of us has a skeleton or two in his or hers closet. Each one of us has thoughts that we think are private but God hears them. They are rattling around in our head. We allow that to happen. They are thoughts that we would never share with anybody else. And then of course you have the guilt and shame stored up in the dark and dusty basement of our past. And that dark and dusty basement has a door that we prefer to keep shut, guilt and shame.

It was Easter morning of that next year that I had a tap at my office door before the sunrise service and sure enough it was Kelly. But she had been crying. It was quite obvious. I am thinking, Oh, no, after receiving good Christian counseling, the kind that is offered by Wisconsin Lutheran Child & Family Service, after going to church every Sunday and to Bible class as well, coming to every mid-week Lenten service, receiving the sacrament on Maundy Thursday, coming to church twice on Good Friday, and it appears that she is still having trouble. Well she sat in my office and could not get the words out but eventually she did but only after she reached into her purse and retrieved something that she handed to me. And what she handed to me is the cross that I am wearing around my neck. She made it with her own hands, soldering nails together in the form of a cross. And what she said to me, I will never forget. She said as she handed me the cross, "Now I know that everything he did, he did for me, too."

What is that? That is nothing less than raw, unadulterated Christian faith. And that is what all that God asks of you to believe as well because everything he has done, he has done for you too. And we decorate our lives at Christmas simply as ways to say thank you. We love because he first loved us with what he accomplished for us on the cross,

winning for us the forgiveness of our sins, a place in his heaven someday and until that time comes, the privilege of a being able to serve him with deeds of kindness.

It was an interesting year that year. If I can just share one last story. At that time our church opened a preschool. One of my responsibilities in our new preschool was to go in occasionally and sit on the floor with the kids sitting around me on the floor and I would tell them about the story of Jesus. And there is one little girl in particular. Her name was Molly and if she wasn't sitting right in front to start with, she would gradually worm her way on all fours past her classmates until she was sitting smack dab in front of me looking up at me with her big brown eyes obviously soaking in everything I said like she was a sponge.

A few months into the school year, I had a knock on my office door and it was Molly's dad, Rich, not a member of our church. And he sat down and he eventually got to the point and he said "Pastor Mattek, we have a problem." And I got thinking "Oh, no." And he said the problem is that my daughter Molly is coming home from preschool everyday all excited about God. And the problem is that my wife and I don't know the first thing about God, could you teach us?" And so Rich and his wife joined the same class as Corey and Kelly. And they were all baptized and confirmed in the same Sunday. It was a really wonderful time.

Well, that Christmas Eve, we had a children's service like so many other churches where the children are up in front and they sing God's praises about the Newborn King and recite Luke 2. Being one of the youngest ones in the group, Molly was right in front looking so pretty and right in the front were her parents Rich and his wife and they were smiling from ear to ear, grinning with pride. But about halfway through the service, I noticed that Rich's facial expression changed. He looked agitated, if not sort of upset and I kept an eye on him wondering what that was all about. As the service concluded, I came out to welcome people to give my announcements. As I did that, Rich got up and walked really fast down the aisle out into the snowy night. And now I am very concerned and so I quickly finished my announcements and I kind of rushed down the center aisle after him and opened the church door to the parking lot and to the beautiful snowy night with big flakes coming straight down and I looked out in the parking lot and I could see him. He had gone to his car and gotten a broom on a stick. He was going from car to car brushing the snow off of the windshields of the cars. And I stepped out and I yelled to him. I said "Rich, what in the world are you doing anyway?" And he stopped what he was doing and looked at me and he yelled back "This is the first Christmas that I know what it's all about. I simply had to do something nice."

And so friends, it's really not that complicated, is it? We are not to tire of doing good, Paul says in our text from Galatians. Not to tire of doing good and to realize that all we have to do is look around for somebody to be nice to. We are nice to others because somebody first of all was nice for us. And of course that niceness was God's son dying and rising for us. Husbands and wives love one another. And from a man's perspective, wives, your husbands will never be perfect. Love them anyway and we are to love you as well. Children, give love and respect to your mom and dad. You know very well how to make life a little miserable for mom and dad. And build a bridge of love and friendship and kindness to an unchurched neighbor that they can walk across that bridge and come to know what you know. Love your church and work hard and get along with everybody in your church, continuing to help your church to decorate it's ministry for the Lord for Christmas and for year round.

Thank you for this opportunity to proclaim God's word to his people today and thank you for the opportunity to share a little bit about the ministry of Wisconsin Lutheran Child & Family Service. Amen.