

“Knowledge of the Good News of Jesus”

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By: Roy G. Pollina+

This morning I want to tell you about my friend, Chad. Chad is a successful business man, loyal husband loving father of three loving children. Also, Chad is the most fanatical sports fan I ever met. Chad’s passion is for LSU football. Chad is in his early 50’s. He attended LSU as an undergraduate and received his degree there. His three children all attended LSU and two of them received their degrees from there. Chad is a season ticket holder to LSU football games. In his house he has a family room decorated in LSU paraphernalia. He has the pictures, banners, and flags. As I said, Chad is a successful business man and he owns a top of the line RV. It has the kitchen, shower, satellite dish, and a bedroom. Except that Chad has taken the bed out of the bedroom and added benches and tables, because this RV only travels between Chad’s house and LSU stadium; it was purchased specifically for one use, tailgating at LSU football games. When Chad’s daughter was married, I had the privilege of being the celebrant at the marriage; we had to check the LSU schedule for home games so there would not be a conflict with the wedding. You see, since graduating from LSU, Chad has missed only three home games and that includes the five years that he lived in Jackson, Mississippi.

I read an article from the Christian Century, the title of the article was “Sticky Faith: What keeps kids connected to church?” It was written by a seasoned youth minister by the name of Jen Bradbury. She says when she was a new youth minister she did all the things that you expect of youth ministry. She had the social events, the service projects, and the youth group meetings with all those little crazy games. She had youth only worship and at youth meetings they had discussions on relevant topics for youth, things like friendships,

alcohol, and sex. She writes, “While I tied these topics to scripture, I rarely focused on Jesus ... Rather than help students cultivate a lifelong relationship with Christ, I focused on getting them to live a Christian lifestyle.” Sadly, she writes she helped the youth develop what some people call a “red bull experience of the Gospel;” that is something “potent enough to help make the right decision in high school but not powerful enough to foster long-term faith.”

The Fuller Youth Institute did a study of kids who took part in church youth groups in high school. They found that 40 to 50 percent of those kids fail to stick with their faith in college. The conclusion of the report was that when it comes to fostering “sticky faith” nothing is more important than the student’s view of the Gospel. Ministries that foster “sticky faith”, the report says are centered on Christ.

Now, let me tell you also that a couple of weeks ago, I attended the Spring Clergy Day conference at Phoebe Needles. The speaker for the day was an Anglican Priest, The Rev’d Martin Smith. Fr. Smith spends most of his time as a spiritual director; he is also the author of several books. In his presentation to the clergy, Fr. Smith said that the reason why church attendance is on the decline is because we, the church members, do not really believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ in our churches. He is not just talking about sacramental theology of how Jesus is present in the bread and wine at the Holy Eucharist. He is talking about the actual living God being present in the church because the church is the Body of Christ. It is similar to the situation that the Apostle Paul faced with the church in Galatia. The Apostle Paul preached to these early Christians a Gospel of Grace, a gospel of the presence of Jesus in their church. But another group of well-meaning Christians convinced the Galatians that grace was not sufficient for their salvation. The Galatians were told that they would need to follow the codes of the Jewish Law as well as believe in Jesus in order to be saved. Of course, St. Paul would have none of that. Jesus is all we need, to set us free from the present evil age. The Galatians had fallen

into what Christian philosopher Dallas Willard calls the “Gospel of Sin Management”. (I love that phrase, “The Gospel of Sin Management.”) According to this Gospel, the Christian message is thought to be essentially concerned with only how we deal with sin. Thus, sin and its management becomes the focus of faith, not Jesus Christ. People fall away from the church because they see Christianity as a list of “do’s and don’ts” instead of the means of having a personal relationship with the living God.

Too often, the church has a “Gospel of Sin Management” rather than proclaiming the presence of Jesus Christ. As an example of this loss of focus on Jesus, Fuller Institute asked college students what it means to be a Christian; thirty-five percent gave an answer that did not mention Jesus at all. I can attest that this happens; in my thirty years as a priest I spent ten years on the Commission on Ministry. I was surprised at the number of people aspiring to the ordained ministry, men and women who want to be ministers of the Gospel, who present to the Commission on Ministry their spiritual autobiographies that never mention Jesus. I don’t know how that happens. Fr. Smith told the clergy at the conference at Phoebe Needles that he experiences much the same thing with adults in Sunday school classes he leads. He says that few Christians in his Sunday School classes can state what Jesus message was.

“The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the Gospel.” Jesus message is that reign of God had begun. Jesus proclaimed the Good News that something the world had never done was going to begin with his followers. For the first time in the world, with Jesus’ followers, blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are the peacemakers, and blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. For the first time in the world all sins are forgiven, a world where we love our neighbor as ourselves and where we recognize that all people are our neighbors, where we respect the dignity of every human being. That is the world that Jesus was proclaiming. The world can only do this where

Jesus is present and Jesus is present with his followers, that is, Jesus is present in his church.

Let me tell you one other thing about my friend Chad, the fanatical LSU football fan. Chad is also a good Christian. I know so much about Chad, about his LSU fanaticism and his Christianity because I traveled with him on 3 of the 5 youth mission trips that he made. I know also that Chad did a medical mission to Honduras and served on the Vestry and Board of Habitat for Humanity.

Ya gotta love Chad’s enthusiasm for the things that Chad loves.

Which brings me to the last thing I want to say, again by referring to Fr. Smith, and I need to be careful here to convey the meaning of what Fr. Smith said. In his presentation, Fr. Smith, reminded the clergy that the Greek language, the language of the Gospels, has three words that are all translated love: Agape, Philadelphia, and Eros. Agape is the one the Gospel uses the most. It is the self-giving love such as God has for us. Philadelphia is brotherly love and Eros is sexual love. The Gospel never uses the word Eros. But, it does use a form of the word translated “to know” which is used to connote intimate knowledge. In the KJV, when the Angel Gabriel tells Mary she will conceive the Christ Child, Mary replies, “How can this be since I know not a man?” What Fr. Smith indicated was that the church, the people of God, lacked that intimate knowledge of the presence of Christ that type of heightened arousal a person has in the presence of someone they love. God is in the midst of us when we gather together at worship, but we do not let ourselves get excited about being in the presence of God. If we did, the churches would be packed every Sunday. Football fans feed off each other’s spirit at football games. Persons like my friend, Chad, who only missed three games in as many decades. They love football and they show it, they feel it, and they miss it when the season is over. The good News of Jesus Christ, that the world is being changed by what we do together as Christ body, is exciting: Now, let me hear an “Amen.”