

2.7.21 Ep5L5 Jesus Not the Destination, but Healer on the Move

- Messiah Lutheran Church in Philadelphia where I was an intern years ago, had a magnificent building
 - Messiah had a huge, red-brick building that seated over 1000 people
 - The pipe organ was almost twice as big as the one we have here at Jerusalem
 - Dozens of stained glass windows on one side of the sanctuary depicted scenes from the Old Testament, and on the other side were scenes from the New Testament
 - And over the altar was a twenty-foot statue of the risen Christ on the cross, which because of colored lights could either rotate in a gaudy way through all the colors of the rainbow, or in a slightly less tacky way could be set to lock in the color of the day to match the paraments – there’s something that’s not quite right about a 20 foot green Jesus for a day like today in Epiphany when the paraments on the altar would be green
 - But despite the huge, beautiful building, there were several other things beside the colorful Jesus that weren’t quite right at Messiah
- Even though the nave comfortably seated over 1000 people – and in the 1950s and 60s it had been filled for not one, but several services each Sunday – but by the late 70s, even though Messiah’s nave comfortably seated over a thousand, on a good Sunday there only about 80 people there
- So here are two clues about what wasn’t quite right at Messiah over the years despite its big building and glorious past.
 - The church had two slogans written on its letterhead in italics, that were meant to stand out and be noticed.
 - One slogan right under the address at North Broad Street and the Roosevelt Boulevard the stationary read AT THE CROSSROAD OF THE DELEWARE VALLEY
 - And the other slogan across the bottom proudly said THE FRIENDLY CHURCH
 - By emphasizing the crossroads of the Delaware Valley, Messiah portrayed itself as a destination
 - It was the place for people from all over the five county Philadelphia area to go!

- It saw itself as a magnet, and once upon a time it had a magnetic preacher until he died – and so Messiah saw itself as a congregation that drew people from far and wide
- The other slogan, THE FRIENDLY CHURCH, was an outright lie
 - In the 1960s Black people began to move into the area, and when they showed up at the doors of the big, beautiful, successful Friendly Church, the ushers had been trained to stop them, and inform them that there was another smaller Lutheran church several blocks down the street where people of THEIR kind worshiped
- Even with a “successful” past that had enabled the congregation to grow and build a spectacular building, the truth was that this congregation had long ago stopped being a destination, and it was selectively friendly in its racism
- In contrast to this congregational ministry that wasn’t right in so many ways, we just heard a gospel reading where Jesus modeled something VERY different
 - In our gospel for today, Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law, and then as the evening came, people from all over the town came to Jesus, and he healed them too
 - And it would have been easy for Jesus to stay there for weeks, or months, or even years – it would have been easy for Jesus to stay put, and let people come to him, but instead, the next morning Jesus left town, saying: “Let us go on the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do. [Mark 1:38]”
 - In both words, and in healing, Jesus was announcing that the kingdom of heaven was at hand – a kingdom where the healings that took place in front of their very eyes pointed to yet-to-fully-arrive Kingdom of God where all illness will be healed, where the sin-sick soul as an old hymns says will be healed, where the hungry of the world will be healed and reconciled, where the brokenness and injustice of the world will be mended, and where death – even death itself will be healed with the gift of life

- Jesus's words, and Jesus healing, took him to the cross, where his death that looked at first like a dismal failure, became the surprising way for Christ's kingdom to mock death
- So after healing Simon's mother-in-law Jesus left town, and went to another town, and another town, and even some foreign towns, and eventually he went to Jerusalem, the cross, and the tomb which could not hold him
- Our church, our building is a great asset, but it is not and should not be the destination for us or for others
 - Sure we gather here on Sunday, but we come not to be entertained or to have our prejudices confirmed
 - We come to hear the faith-creating Word of God, rooted in the scriptures, that speaks Christ's forgiveness, love and life into our lives, and to gather at the altar for a foretaste of the Kingdom of God – the God revealed to us as the Christ who in his healing death and resurrection proclaims that he is FOR us
 - And while Jerusalem's building is too big, and too firmly fixed on its foundation to move, at the end of each service God's people – Christ body – are sent with words like, GO IN PEACE, SERVE THE LORD!
 - The building it not moved, but we are moved, because on Christ's behalf we are sent to this town, to the next neighbor, to the next school, to the next workplace, and to the next town, so that instead of counting on people to come to Christ and Christ's church, like Jesus we are called to take the kingdom of God to them – ALL of them, not just people who look or speak like us
 - We DO gather with us around the word and the table each week, BUT we are always sent from this place to love God, to love our neighbors, and to share Christ's kingdom in every time and place