

“Rediscovering What Christianity Really Is.”

John 11 : 1-45

A couple of weeks ago on February 26th, Starbucks made a rediscovery.

All across America thousands of unsuspecting people were suddenly faced with an unexpected crisis. Heading into their neighborhood Starbucks to get a caffeine boost, customers were met with a terrifying reality: locked doors. Starbucks had shut down.

Okay, it was only for three hours (5:30-8:30). But for some of people the mere thought that all 7100 Starbucks in North America were closed was enough to jumpstart trembling hands and throbbing heads. I don't know where the nearest Starbucks is from here, but I do know that Starbucks is hugely popular. Lots of people like to go there to buy coffee. If you don't mind paying around five or six bucks for a cup of coffee, then Starbucks could be right up your alley!

But anyway, why did Starbucks take a three hour coffee break? To rediscover what they were all about. They had forgotten what Starbucks was all about.

Or in the words of CEO Howard Schultz, Starbucks shut down to open up and own up to its “first love.” Starbucks shut down to rediscover and rededicate the company to the “love, passion, and commitment” of the coffee experience. Starbucks had forgotten its basic philosophy, and so they decided to rediscover it.

This quote is taken from the official Starbucks “Transformation Agenda Communication #8:”

Tomorrow evening, we will come together in an unprecedented event in our company's storied history. We will close all our U.S. company-operated stores to teach, educate, and share our love of coffee, and the art of espresso. And in doing so, we will begin to elevate the Starbucks Experience for our customers. We are passionate about our coffee. And we will revisit our standards of quality that are the foundation for the trust that our customers have in our coffee and in all of us. (1)

In a sense, this is what the church does on an annual basis....and we don't do it for three hours, but we do it for six weeks. We call it “Lent.” Oh, we don't shut down -- but we do go back to the basics. We do rediscover and rededicate.

This Lenten season is rapidly drawing to a close, perhaps we can still rediscover why we are here in the first place. What *is* Christianity?

One of the things that can sometimes hinder our understanding of Christianity is our busy-ness. Look how busy we are! Our church bulletin tells the story of our busyness . . . our weekly schedules, our programs, our missions, our meetings, our wider church functions. We feel good about our busyness. But has our “busyness” overwhelmed our true identity? Have we forgotten why the church exists at all?

Starbucks closed down to find the “soul of its past.” Maybe the church needs more than just Lent in order to find *its* soul.

And who are we? And why are we here? What is our original purpose?

The reason we are here is because of a promise that Jesus gave one day out at a cemetery near Bethany. He said: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”* (John 11:25, 26)

What is Christianity? It’s this: Christianity is the grandest rescue of all time. Christianity is when God sent Jesus into this world to rescue us from the sting of death. When we believe in Jesus Christ....and the word “believe” as it is used here, means “trust”.....we are saved from eternal death.

That is what Christianity really is: It is a Divine rescue. Trust in Jesus Christ to save you from death, and He will save you from death. Period. That is why Jesus said: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.....”* It means that there is hope for you beyond the grave.

This is the basic message of the Gospel that has been buried among all of our talk about social justice and doing good works. It’s time to un-bury it.

Make no mistake, doing social justice *is* in the job description of every Christian. Doing good works *is* in the job description of every Christian. You cannot divorce compassionate action from Christianity. We *are to actively care* about God’s world and the people that God has made.

But I fear that we mainline Protestants for too long, have been trying to build the building while ignoring the foundation!

The “building” is all of our good deeds, but the foundation is Jesus Christ and His saving us from death. We need to be rooted in faith in Christ.

This is not fundamentalist dogma that I’m preaching.... Christianity just is what it is. And what it is, is that Christ came to save us.

In an interview which he gave on German television in 1976, Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner was asked: ‘Could you briefly formulate the purpose and theme of your book, *Foundations of Christian Faith*?’ His reply was this ‘I really only want to tell the reader something very simple. Human persons in every age, always and everywhere, whether they realize and reflect upon it or not, are in relationship with the unutterable mystery of human life that we call God. Looking at Jesus Christ the crucified and risen one, we can have the hope that now in our present lives, and finally after death, we will meet God as our own fulfillment.’

And, Reformed theologian Karl Barth had this to say:

“Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is himself the way.”

Our very own Green Bay Packers have a heritage about regularly revisiting the basics of what it means to be football players...of what it means to be a football team. When Vince Lombardi was head coach, he would begin training camp each summer with a team meeting in which he would take a football and hold it up like this....(*holding a football*).....and he would say to his players: “*Gentlemen, this is a football.*” And from there, the players would rediscover the basics...blocking and tackling....the basics of the game of football.

Too often the basics get obscured by other things. “*Gentlemen, this is a football.*”

Ladies and gentlemen, this is Jesus Christ Lord and Savior, who said: “*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.....*” (John 11:25). Amen.

(1) Professor Leonard Sweet