

SWEET HOLLOW PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH JANUARY 15, 2017

DEAR MEMBERS OF SWEET HOLLOW CHURCH

On this cold day in January, I greet all of you in the name of Christ.

It has been over 2,000 years since my birth to Zecharias and Elizabeth, two elderly people living in the hill country of Palestine. An angel had visited my parents and predicted this miraculous birth. It was also prophesied in the Old Testament by Isaiah

“A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

Moral corruption had made deep inroads into the pagan world and also into Judaism.: I tried to warn the people around the countryside that they were going to pay a price for their sinful lives. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 3:2; cf. Mk. 1:4). To those who repented and wanted to live a reformed life, I baptized them and impressed on them that God wanted them to lead new lives. I was upset when I saw superficial Hebrews submitting to Baptism, but void of any radical change of conduct.

Since I preached the need for repentance, wore strange clothes made of camel’s hair (no Macy’s then) and was not exactly the picture of gentility, I was not the most popular preachers. But the message eventually got out and people started fearing that the infidelity and drunkenness of the people had gone too far and they started listening to my message. At one point, they even asked me if I was a prophet or the Messiah – both of which I denied telling the people that one who comes after me is the Lamb of God. I later had Jesus come to me for Baptism. Although I felt inadequate to be the one immersing Him in the Jordan, I did as he asked. WOW – the spirit was really with him telling him that he is the beloved son. Although I knew him as a relative, I didn’t really know who he was until that heavenly blessing on the Messiah.

While I am still visiting you in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I would like to leave you with two messages:

1. The need to forgive and allow others to forgive you. I am amazed at how long people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can hold a grudge and how devastating some of these disputes can be.

I look at your world and realize that you also don’t get it: repent and forgive those who have wronged you. Neighbors don’t speak with their neighbors over some argument over a fence;

some families get torn apart by petty differences and in the church, hard feelings and pain arise over how things are done. Haven't you read about the disciples asking Jesus about forgiveness:

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!"

Your own doctors and scientists back up what Jesus meant:

Unforgiveness is classified in medical books as a disease. According to Dr. Steven Standiford, chief of surgery at the Cancer Treatment Centers of America, refusing to forgive makes people sick and keeps them that way. With that in mind, forgiveness therapy is now being used to help treat diseases, such as cancer.

"It's important to treat emotional wounds or disorders because they really can hinder someone's reactions to the treatments, even someone's willingness to pursue treatment," Standiford explained.

Of all cancer patients, 61 percent have forgiveness issues, and of those, more than half are severe, according to research by Dr. Michael Barry, a pastor and the author of the book, *The Forgiveness Project*.

"Harboring these negative emotions, this anger and hatred, creates a state of chronic anxiety," he said.

Pastor Barry said the first step in learning to forgive is to realize how much we have been forgiven by God. "When a person forgives from the heart – which is the gold standard we see in Matthew 18 - forgiveness from the heart – we find that they are able to find a sense of peacefulness. Quite often our patients refer to that as a feeling of lightness," he said.

Barry said most people don't realize what a burden anger and hatred were until they let them go.

2. One way to eliminate anger and bitterness is to be open to different ways of faith and to understand that the church always changes. Life itself changes, so obviously there will be new ways of doing things in the church. At least try to understand why a particular change is being introduced.

I have heard many pastors complain that the people always argue that "We've never done it that way" I understand the importance of repetition and standards, but so much of your differences are really minor. The church has changed so much in the past century – Protestants influencing Catholics and visa versa. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most Protestant churches did not use candles in worship – claiming they were too papal or

Catholic. Slowly this has changed to a point where most churches today light candles for worship.

One of your people told me about the shorter ending of the Lord's Prayer in the Catholic Church. Many visiting Protestants singing the Our Father would start to sing the doxology at the end only to be embarrassed that it was not used. Today, the Catholic Church ends with "But deliver us from evil" and then includes a prayer - finishing with the ending used in Protestant churches.

Protestant churches in the 18<sup>th</sup> century used the psalms as the music for worship – some even banning other hymns or music as unholy. I heard a man in a Catholic Church mention that instead of just a cantor, many RC churches are now organizing choirs to lead singing.

How many hymns should be sung, what hymnals to use, how Communion is distributed, Baptizing of new members with a basin or submersion, are stumbling-block issues for churches that can cause so much hardship and hurt. Though I am only visiting your world, I can observe many problems that need your attention: there is economic stress, cancer and other diseases, terrorism, rebellion of youth, homeless people and horrible accidents at work and on the highways. These are the issues that need the attention of the church.

We can't help but be influenced by the world we live in: the fear, the materialism, the importance of self and the secularist culture. It is so easy to end up following the popular world we live in rather than the Lord Jesus.

The world's standard is one of self-promotion, self-esteem, and self-worship, and other people have value only insofar as they are willing to idolize us the way we idolize ourselves. Such an attitude always leads to "dissension and jealousy," the inevitable results of worshipping the god of self. The cure is found in Titus 2:11-13: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."

PLEASE LET LOVE SHINE IN YOUR CHURCH. I HAVE SEEN YOUR  
GOOD WORKS AND YOUR FAITH AND KNOW THAT GOD'S SPIRIT IS  
PRESENT IN SWEET HOLLOW PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. PEACE AND LOVE  
TO ALL OF YOU

JOHN