

1506 Orchard Terrace
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www.lindenpres.org

Pastor:
Rev. Dr. William C. Weaver
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Sunday, January 24, 2010

Sermon Texts: Jeremiah 1: 4-10
Psalm 71: 1-24
Luke 4: 21-30
I Corinthians 13: 1-13

Sermon Title: 'All God's Children'

Sermon Topic: Evangelism/The Inclusiveness of God's Family

Sermon Purpose: To teach just who it is that the ministry of Jesus is for.

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Sermon Prayer: Lord, grant that the words of my lips and the meditation of my heart not only be acceptable in your sight but might reach the hearts and souls of those who are in need. Amen.

I can remember growing up in a community where it took only three **seconds** to tell if someone was a stranger in the community or a visitor in the church. After all, at that time there weren't too many blonde Italians or redheaded Germans living in Pancake, Pennsylvania. Until I was in the seventh grade, there were only two black students in the entire building. (They happened to be brother and sister and their family lived "up on the hill along the highway.") Everyone living in Pancake was **at least** third generation Italian, German, Slavic, or Polish. English was the predominant language, except when families were behind closed doors. And, attending worship at that "other LPC," the Laboratory Presbyterian Church was like having a family reunion every week because almost everyone you met was related to someone in your family.

That's **not** the situation in Pancake, now, nor is it the situation here. Times have changed and the focus of the ministry of the church needs to change with them.

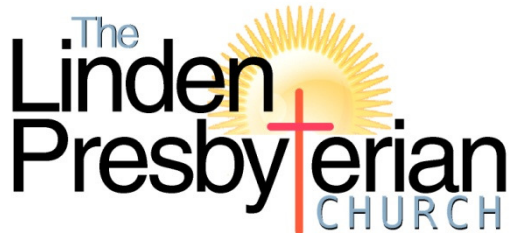
For example, the Scriptures claim "God's word is for everyone." That hardly seems a controversial statement, right? We all know it and believe it, so **who** could get in trouble for saying something like **that**? Yet, a statement just like that almost got Jesus **killed**, early in his ministry.

In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus astonished, annoyed, and angered people for **two** reasons: (1) because Jesus was making this extravagant claim about **himself**, and (2) even **more so** because he said he had been sent to the **poor**, the **prisoners**, the **blind**, and the **oppressed**. In other words, he went to the **outcasts**, to the **losers**: to society's **rejects**, rather than to the good, **religious** people.

Jesus anticipated their thoughts. He said, "I know you're thinking 'Doctor, heal yourself.'" In other words, he was saying, "You think charity begins at home. **Forget** the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed; show **us** what you're able to do! After all, if you're **really** sent from God, you would **know** that you have to start with us Jews, **first**."

But then, Jesus went back through their own history to remind them of when the prophets helped gentiles – even though there were Jews who were **also** in need. His statements **angered** the





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people. In fact, they were angry enough to **kill** him. “**We’re** the chosen people! You have to start with **us!**” It was an **insult** for Jesus to say that he was going to the outcasts and to the unacceptable people, **before** he went to the Jews!

Today’s sentiment, “Charity begins at home,” has created a philosophy that demands that we “Deal with our **own** people, first.” Even church members expect the time and energy of their pastor and their officers to be directed to only benefiting **them**.

I, and my predecessor pastors, have heard many from **this** congregation complain that the pastor is too busy marrying and burying, counseling and helping the **wrong** people. He should be more concerned about what **we** want and what **we** need, instead of reaching out to people across town or down the street.

All three pastors this congregation has ever known **have** held the concerns of LPC members as a primary focus of their ministry. But, aren’t we supposed to reach out to **others** in need, **too?**

Life **would** be so much **easier** if I maintained a very strict rule that I only performed the weddings of those who are members of **this** congregation. That would mean I would be officiating maybe only **four** weddings a year, at the most.

If I only officiated the **funerals** of **members**, I would have several hours each month that I could use to call additional meetings of our boards and organizations, to do more work for the Presbytery, or to improve and **lengthen** my sermons. (**That** would be a real thrill for everybody, now wouldn’t it?) Maybe I could think up programs and activities for LPC members and officers to coordinate and chair.

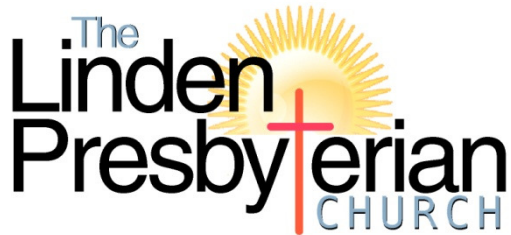
If I only counseled or helped those within the parochial boundaries of this congregation, I would have more time to do **many** things. Maybe I could finish the book I’ve been writing for the past fifteen years.

But, have you ever stopped to think about how a congregation **benefits** when its pastor **performs** those weddings, and funerals, and counseling sessions, and helps those people in need? The **first** benefit is that, occasionally, those families come to worship and - sometimes – **become** members. (Some of the people sitting in this sanctuary, this morning, came through that doorway that was opened when the pastor of LPC went that “extra mile.”) **Second**, the **fees** from those weddings bring additional revenue for the annual budget. **Third**, people come to know LPC exists, and that it’s a place where people **care** about other people. They come to realize that the structure at the corner of Princeton Road and Orchard Terrace is **not** a **municipal** building that looks like Cranford’s City Hall. [These aren’t the reasons I reach out to these people, but they **are** interesting dividends.]

If we didn’t reach out to the community, how many people would **not** have the opportunity to share in the ministry of Jesus Christ? Our society has become so **specialized** that each of us has one or two things we do best, and we stick to that. If someone is a member of the choir, they’re not a teacher in the Sunday Church School. If someone is a member of the Sunday Church School they’re usually not a member of the Mission Project Task Group.

My point is that there **are** those people who **benefit** from working on a project where they, too, can feel needed and useful.





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Those who are members of a worshipping congregation **have** a system of support ready and waiting for them: the pastor, the officers, and other members. Yet those who are **outside the church** face overpowering crises, at certain times in their lives. Often, the only support they **receive** is from a pastor who is willing to listen and to help, and from a congregation that is willing to reach out – through their pastor, on their behalf as one extension of that congregation’s ministry, in the name of Jesus Christ. The officers and members reach out to the needy and troubled in **other** ways, too.

Jesus shows us that we are to provide hope, encouragement, freedom, and good news to those who struggle the most with life.

In Jesus’ day, the Jewish leaders **expected** preferential treatment because they were the “chosen people.” “You have to work with **us**, first,” they told Jesus. Today, many of **us** want preferential treatment: “Minister to **us**, first!”

The religious people in Jesus’ day were offended because Jesus said he was going to work with the “wrong” people. They didn’t think the poor, the blind, the oppressed, and the captives were the right people to **start** with.

But Jesus’ involvement with the poor, the blind, the oppressed and the prisoners points to the fact that God’s word **is** for **everyone**, even if they don’t seem to be “our kind of people.”

So, maybe **we** take offense at Jesus’ words, too. How many times have we heard particular congregations referred to as “the rich church,” or “the poor church,” “the white church,” “the black church,” or “the holy rollers?” And, how many times have we understood these designations to mean that we were **not** supposed to associate with anyone who was a member of **those** congregations?

I can remember standing in this very building, nearly three decades ago, and being told by a member of this congregation that I was “associating with the wrong people.” The very words, that **still** ring in my ears, were: “You’re not going to **get** very far being friends with ... **They’re** not going to do you any **good**.”

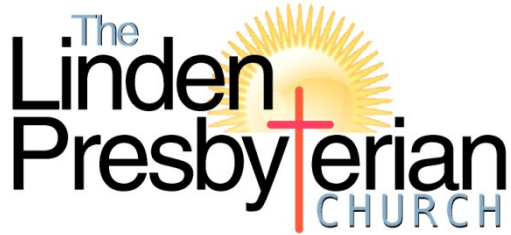
And yet, I can also hear the words of Christ commanding **every** believer to carry the message to **all** nations – to **everyone**.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ **is** for everyone. The **trouble** comes when we take the word “everyone” seriously. Everyone is every color – black, white, red, brown, or yellow, every ethnic background, every religious belief, every cultural setting, every ideology. God’s word is for **all** of God’s children.

Jesus’ words in that synagogue, on that Sabbath day – and his actions throughout his life – demonstrated that God’s word **is** for **everyone** whether they are in the church pew on a Sunday morning, or in a jail cell; in the executive office of a corporation, in a Guatemalan prison camp, in a refuge center in Haiti; in a home for the blind and the deaf, or homeless. Jesus shakes us **out** of our accepted complacency and widens our vision into a rainbow-tinted, multi-faceted panorama.

The one who came at Christmastime offended the religious people in the synagogue because he **said** that as the Anointed One of God, he was going out to the **other** people – to the poor, the





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outcasts and the unaccepted people of society – to bring them hope and freedom.

What do those words from Jesus say to **us**, today? What does Jesus' **example** mean to **us** who are called to minister in his name? Think about it as you consider your ministry.

Let us pray:

Lord, who walks in the midst of the churches and knows their works, cleanse and renew your churches, today, that by their witness the nations of the world may be gathered before you: who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

