

Brackenhurst Methodist Church: 28 June 2009
God is Bigger Than... “Why I don’t say grace.”

- INTROIT: We are here to Praise You

Welcome & Notices

Call to Worship

- Thank You
- Never let my hunger die

Baptisms **(Neil)**

- Welcome to the Family

- Great is the Lord
- In the Stillness
- How Great are You Lord

Prayers – Close off Worship Time **(Neil)**
Offering **(Neil announce, receive offering)**

- Like a Father (Shepherd) (repeat as necessary)

INTRODUCTION

- I’ve been on a journey over the last two years or so
 - Probably more than that
 - * In fact, my whole life I’ve been on a journey, but particularly over these last two years I have been questioning a lot about Christianity
 - I’ve been questioning a lot of what we do
 - * And asking why we behave the way we behave
- Behaviour which, honestly speaking, to people on the outside looking in, as it were, is at the very least strange, and at worst offensive.
 - So part of my journey has been to look at the stuff we do as Christians with a critical eye, and I’m at a point where I would like to be vulnerable and share some of my journey with you.
- So randomly over the next few weeks, until we start our next sermon series in mid August, I’m going to be preaching a series of sermons called “Why I don’t...”
 - The titles are provocative!
- The intention is not to offend, but to get us thinking: Why do we behave the way we do?

- Why do we do things — honestly more out of habit, than out of conviction, than out of religious necessity?
 - * This morning, if you haven't noticed, I'm telling you "Why I don't say grace"
- So I've been on a journey, asking these questions, and the answer I have come up with is that God is bigger than
 - God is bigger than saying grace before every meal, and so on
- So I want to share with you, over the next months how is God is so much bigger than so many restrictions we place on our faith.
 - And I'm going to be doing that, I hope, in two ways
- Firstly, to share the question in the context of my personal journey
 - My journey may not be your journey, and that's okay
- Secondly by trying to keep Christ at the centre of the question
 - As Christians we are Christ followers
- So I hope that as we do that you will not only share with me, but also if you disagree with me that you will engage with me and we will be able to journey some of the way together
 - So let's turn to scripture, by the way there are very few passages about the necessity of saying grace in the Bible, most involve Jesus giving thanks before a meal, but I'll speak more about that later

Scripture:

Luke 24:13-35

Message

OPENING STATEMENTS

- As I said earlier, today I'm looking at the statement, "Why I don't say grace"
 - You may think that this is a strange statement for a minister to make!
 - * How can a minister not say grace!
 - And what happens if I invite him for a meal?
 - * Should we say grace, Should we ask him to say grace?
- And have you noticed, that if you're in a Christian gathering and you don't say grace people get uncomfortable!
 - One of the things that they will tell you with the Alpha course
 - * The Alpha course is a course dealing with the basics of Christianity, and is intended to be run by people who are Christians for people who aren't Christians
 - So they tell you, when you run an Alpha course, don't say grace

- * Because you don't want to make people who aren't Christians uncomfortable
- But do you know how uncomfortable the Christians get!
 - * They don't know what to do with themselves!
- They kinda not sure
 - * Can they just start eating? Should they huddle with their Christian friends and say grace
 - * Should they just be quiet for a moment by themselves
 - * After all, aren't we sinning if we don't say grace?
 - * Will God not strike us down if we eat without giving thanks?
 - * And even the non-Christians are confused because they're expecting there to be grace — after all, this is a Christian function!
- You see, for many of us, grace, which I don't think is all that important,
 - And which for many of us is something said by rote: “For what we are about to receive...”
 - * Is a central part of who we are as Christians, and defines our faith practice outside the church
 - * Not preach to friends, not evangelise, not read Bible, go to Bible study
 - * But because we are Christians, we will say grace!
- I think that grace has become much more important in the life of the average Christian — almost the mark of being a Christian — that what it ought to be
 - I think Christianity, I think God, is bigger than saying grace every mealtime, and I'd like to tell you why.
 - * I'm going to start with three stories from my journey about grace

(1) Story 1: Growing up

- I grew up in a home that was only nominally Christian
 - In my memory my mother has never gone to church except to support me, my father I remember going to church occasionally when I was very young
 - * We never went to Christmas or Easter services or anything like that
 - We never said grace at home and, although my mother has always been supportive of my involvement in church she has also always been very critical of the church
- The one exception was when we went to my dad's parents for Sunday lunch, my grandfather would say grace:
 - “For what we are about to receive, dear Lord, make us truly thankful. For Christ's sake, Amen”
- And then we could eat!

(2) Story 2: Tim Keys

- Second story relates to a friend, mentor and youth pastor by the name of Tim Keys.
 - I haven't seen him for a while and I may have gotten some details wrong, and I don't have his permission to tell the story, but I'm sure that he'll forgive me
- Tim was born without legs, his parents were church going, faithful members, and very involved in the life of the Full Gospel Church, and so they prayed for healing for him
 - And his legs did start growing but they stopped just after his knees, and so he grew up with artificial legs
 - * Having grown up with them he was comfortable in them, would walk and run and do everything that anybody else could do
 - Except, of course, that artificial legs don't have the mobility that natural legs have
- One night they were out for supper at a restaurant and his mother asked Tim if he would say the grace
 - He didn't like having to say grace in a public place, so instead of saying it quietly at the table he made great performance of getting out of the booth and kneeling in the aisle next to the table — struggling with his legs and then praying loudly so that the attention of the entire restaurant was focussed on his family
- Needless to say, he was never asked to say grace again when they were out

(3) Story 3: Amahoro

- Third story
- Just a couple of weeks ago I was privileged to be able to go to a Christian conference at Youth for Christ centre in Hekpoort.
 - The reason that I went to the conference is because one of my favourite authors from the States, Brian McLaren — someone who is shaping my way of thinking deeply, was speaking there
- But the conference wasn't about Brian McLaren, but was rather a gathering of Christian leaders from all over the world, but particularly from Africa
 - And specifically East Africa. It was called the Amahoro Gathering, Amahoro being an East African word for peace.
 - * Many of the people there having come out of Rwanda and Burundi, and South Africa.

- The theme of the conference was Christianity is a post colonial Africa and so a large part of the discussion was spent speaking about reconciliation.
- And what an amazing conference it was! There was space for people to be real — for me as a whitey to share my struggles without feeling as though I would be judged for being a racist. People were just so real
 - Nobody was running around waving floppy Bibles quoting scriptures left right and centre
 - * People were just being who God created them to be, and not trying to pretend to be something they're not.
- It only struck me afterwards: The whole week, we didn't say grace
- So, three stories about grace. I ask that you would keep them in mind as we continue, I will be referring back to them as I close off a little bit later
 - Let's continue now, though, by looking at our scripture and the meaning of grace
- I chose the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus this morning for a number of reason
 - Firstly it speaks of a journey
 - Secondly Christ is central in that journey
 - And thirdly we have a picture of Christ giving thanks, and being revealed as that happens
- So to being with today I want to suggest that the story is metaphorical and is not meant to be read literally
 - In other words if you had had a video camera on the road there would not have been a third person in the video.
- You know, we have an organisation in our church called the Walk to Emmaus
 - And they have all sorts of secrets about what happens on that weekend
 - * How many people have been on Emmaus? So you know!
 - Now I'm going to reveal a secret about Emmaus, for all of you who haven't been!
 - * It's not really a walk!
- So when somebody who has been says to you, and you're going on Emmaus, and they ask if you've packed your walking shoes you can laugh at them because you know better.
 - But it is a journey. It is a metaphorical journey of moving closer to God and of seeing Christ being revealed as you journey through the weekend.
 - * I think that the story of Emmaus is intended to be read in the same way
- And the story is about how Christ is revealed in the breaking of bread

- How the presence of Christ is discovered in the meal.
 - * And is a story which seems to condense the life and practice of the early Christian church into a parable
- And so often when we read the stories of Jesus we discover that shared meals were central to Jesus' activity.
 - This was where people got to know him

(1) Honest Grace is about the presence of Christ

- If you aren't going to allow Christ at your table, then you ought not to be saying grace
 - When you say grace, I believe, more than anything you are inviting Christ to share the meal with you, and when you invite Christ to your table strange things happen!
 - * The rich start giving their money away! Remember Zacheaus?
 - * The unattractive invade the room! Remember the sinful women with the perfume?
 - * Rules get broken! Picking corn on the Sabbath
 - * Your food gets shared with those who have none
- I think very often we say, Lord, be present at our table, but not too present because I don't want you to disrupt my life
 - Like we say grace because it's expected, but hoping that God isn't listening
- I understand in the story of the two on the road to Emmaus, that they were journeying home from Jerusalem
 - All these things had happened that they were trying to process.
 - * They got to their home, they invited Christ to stay with them — without knowing who it was
 - * And as they shared with each other suddenly their lives were totally transformed
- They had come home after a walk of 11km from Jerusalem; it was already getting late, they were no doubt ready to turn in for the evening, they would have been comfortable
 - Now they get up and run 11km back to Jerusalem
 - * When we start praying grace as though we mean it, we're asking for a turn our life upside down kind of transformation.
- So when we say grace at our table, it has to be firstly about the presence of Christ among us.
 - It is not rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub
 - * Although I really don't think God minds if we say that with meaning

- But is about the centrality of Christ among us
 - Christ's presence in our conversation
 - Christ's presence in our relationships
 - Christ's presence in our thankfulness for all that we have
- Don't make grace something that you are going rush through and say by habit when everybody at the table is fighting with each other and rushing to finish supper to go out
 - In that case, rather be aware of Christ's presence in other ways.
- So grace is about Christ's presence.
 - I'm grateful that I wasn't brought up saying grace when it meant nothing to my mother, at least.
- I was brought up to be honest about who I am, and I think that this is more valuable than saying grace when I don't really mean it.

(2) Honest Grace calls us to giving

- In the Emmaus story it was when the disciples lived out the hospitality taught by Jesus that they saw Christ
 - When they urged him to stay with them, when they invited him into their home and shared their meal with them
 - * That was when their eyes were opened and they saw and recognised Jesus.
- When we give thanks for what we have, we have to consider those who do not have
 - And the presence of Christ at our table will demand that we share what he has given to us in abundance
- I think if we are not willing to do that, then our saying grace is simply paying lip service
 - And it is difficult because I know how much I have and how difficult it is to share
 - * And that also is part of the journey I'm on
- When I say I don't say grace
 - I'm not saying that we shouldn't be thankful
- But our thankfulness should not be expressed in a one line prayer without thought for others.
 - For what good is it if a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food and we say I wish you well; keep warm and well fed, but do nothing about it? (James 2:15-16)
- Can we pray honestly over our food while there are hungry people close to us?

- See, every time Jesus gave thanks over food, it was in the context of sharing.
 - * He gave thanks in the Emmaus story as he shared food with Cleopas and his friend
 - * He gave thanks in other stories before he fed the multitudes (eg Mk 8:6)
 - * And he gave thanks before sharing the bread and wine at the last supper
- I'm not going to labour this point because it's difficult, but it seems to me almost as though we say grace justifying our selfishness
 - As long as I'm thankful it's okay if I don't share.
- I think God would refer honesty
 - “Lord, I recognise how much I have, and how your presence here at the table calls me to share, but I struggle to do that. I struggle to give away what I have worked hard for when I see others who seem too lazy to do anything. I don't know how to help, and where to give, and I recognise that sometimes those are also excuses for not giving.
- The wonderful thing is that when we're honest with God he meets us where we are.
 - When we pray like that I think Christ is present — but I also think he will challenge us in our honesty

(3) Honest Grace reminds us of the Eucharist

- In the Emmaus story verse 30 sounds very familiar:
 - “he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them...”
- See, those were the same words that Jesus used at the last supper:
 - “he took the bread, gave thanks, gave it to them, took the cup of wine, gave thanks over it and passed it to them..”
- We say those words every time we celebrate Holy Communion, and when we celebrate Holy Communion we are reminded of several things
 - We are reminded of Christ's death and the call to us to be willing to follow him to the cross
 - We are reminded of being one with Christ
 - And we are reminded of being one with one another because we all share in the one loaf
- So when we say grace before our meal we are reminded not just of the presence of Christ at our table
 - We are reminded that we all are brothers and sisters with one another
 - * With everyone regardless of race, denomination, age or language
 - * and with everyone who celebrates the sacrament throughout the world

- So Christ's presence calls us to celebrate the presence of others in our lives and calls us to set aside our differences so that we may together call Christ Lord

CONCLUSION

- So much of what we do as Christians, I think, and maybe it is my background speaking, says this, "I'm a Christian; I want to follow Christ and so I have to behave in a certain way."
 - This is stuff we learn at church
 - * We go to a church meeting and they say grace before the meal so we think, "Ooh, I'd better say grace if I want to fit in the with this crowd"
 - It is becomes a requirement of being a good person
- I don't think that Jesus ever intended that.
 - Jesus wanted us to be us — to be free to be who we are, not to become captive to rituals which are many times meaningless and which, when we don't do them, make us feel guilty.
 - * And I'm going to be saying this about some other things as well — I think that it is true generally of how we behave
- So why don't I say grace
 - I don't say grace because I wasn't brought up with grace saying being an important part of my culture.
 - I don't say grace because too often I see grace as a hypocritical prayer meant for the purposes of showing off that we're Christians
 - * Saying grace by rote is meaningless. There is no point in saying grace if it is just a habit, something that you feel bad or awkward about if you miss — it needs to flow out of a genuine relationship
 - * You know, I'd rather be an honest sinner than a dishonest saint.
 - So grace shouldn't be a sign of piety for yourself, or for other people in restaurant.
 - * And I think when Tim made a show of it in the restaurant he hit the nail on the head
 - I don't say grace because when we are living in a state of grace and honesty and sharingness as we were at Amahoro, Christ is so present that we don't need to invoke his presence at the table because we are already aware of his presence and the work that he is doing
- It is good to say grace when it genuinely reminds you of the presence of Christ in the midst of your day — and calls you to action to share what you have and the presence of Christ with those around you.

- And it is good to say grace to remind your children to be grateful for what they have
- And it is good to say grace to invite Christ to your table to come and transform your life!
 - * But do that knowing grace is a dangerous prayer!
- And I'm very happy if you want to say grace in front of me, and I'm happy to say grace if you ask me to!
- Earlier I mentioned that I didn't think that the story of the two on the road to Emmaus was true.
 - John Dominic Crossan says it this way, in two three word sentences:
 - "Emmaus never happened.
 - Emmaus always happens!" (in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p 197)
 - When we live a life of thankfulness and giving and honesty in which Christ is central
 - * When we live a life of grace Emmaus happens, and that's when our mealtime prayers become real and powerful.
- To close, I don't think that it matters, really, whether we say grace or not. God is bigger than grace!
 - What is important is whether we are living a life of grace
- And when we're doing that then our prayers, whether they are prayers in our morning quiet time, prayers before we go to bed at night, or prayers before meals
 - Will reflect the presence of Christ among us, and in the world
- May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
- Amen

Prayers of Response and Intercession

- My Love and My Life

Benediction

Doxology

- May Your Presence (Neil announce)
- Jubilate Deo