

Why The World Needs Us!

1. Warm up: Sunday was the Super Bowl. Did you watch? Do you care who won the game? What did you think of the halftime entertainment or the Puppy Bowl?
2. The reputation of churches in American culture today has sunk pretty low. A Gallup poll of young adults who don't go to church indicated that 87% say that Christians are judgmental, 85% say they're hypocritical, 72% say they're out of touch with reality, and 91% say Christians are anti-LGBTQ. Most people would say, "What we most need from churches is that they stay far away from us!"
 - a. Arthur Burns, former Fed Chair and a Jewish man, once led a public prayer in which prayed that Christians would come to know Jesus. What do you think he meant? Do you agree? If so, in your view, how big is the problem?
 - b. Jeff told a story of a teenage girl in his church youth group who became pregnant and decided to marry the father of her child. But the pastor refused to officiate at her wedding ostracized her from the church when she most needed her church. The church actually thought it was doing the right thing. How does that happen? What's going wrong with their theological thinking in a situation like that?
 - c. Jesus said, "Judge not," but many churches specialize in judging. Jesus said we should be humble like a child. Children know how much they don't know and have lots of questions. But many churches arrogantly believe they know everything. The Bible says that fear creates hate, but perfect love casts out fear. Yet many churches fear anyone who's "other" and respond with intolerance. No wonder the Gallup poll turned out as it did. Do you have unchurched friends? What's their impression of churches and Christians? What would it take to interest them in church?
 - d. Ephesians 2:1-3 says, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of the world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh . . . , and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else." Note the statement that we are "by nature children of wrath." What do you think that means? Do you experience those impulses?
3. In II Corinthians 5:18, the Apostle Paul tells us that "God reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us . . . the Ministry of Reconciliation. In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." That's what churches are supposed to be doing – the Ministry of Reconciliation. Our scripture reading for Sunday elaborated on what that Ministry of Reconciliation is supposed to look like. Read Ephesians 2:1-17, as printed on p. 3.

- a. As described in our passage, the Ministry of Reconciliation consists of two key parts. First, Jesus came to reconcile us humans to one another despite our differences. Second, Jesus came to reconcile us to God. First let's focus on reconciling with one another. When you were growing up, what subgroup of people did your community most look down upon? How did that affect you?
 - b. In the first century, Jews and Gentiles often despised one another. Our scripture passage tells us that Jesus has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it." But Jesus didn't stop there. During his ministry, he went out of his way to welcome and include as equals: women, Samaritans, Roman occupiers, the poor, the sick, gay people, people of different political persuasions, and those who were considered "sinners" and "unclean." Based on this pattern we see in Jesus, what should churches who represent Jesus be like? In your view, how are well or not are we doing at LifeJourney? In your view, what is our growing edge in this regard?
 - c. Jeff said that Jesus was into diversity, equity, and inclusion. Do you think that's an accurate statement? Why has DEI become so despised by so many in our culture today? How should we respond to that? How can we make it better?
 - d. Why is it so important for the world to see churches modeling reconciliation?
4. Helping people reconcile with God is the second prong of the Ministry of Reconciliation.
- a. What does it mean to be alienated from God? Have you ever felt alienated from God? Describe what it feels like and looks like to be alienated from God?
 - b. It's often said that Jesus had to die for us to be forgiven for our sins. There are many theories as to why; Jeff shared one of them. He said Jesus himself had to become a victim of horrific wrongdoing in order to have the moral authority to forgive wrongdoers on behalf of all who have been victims. What are your thoughts about that theory? Does it make sense to you? Why or why not?
 - c. As part of our Ministry of Reconciliation as a church and as individuals, we're supposed to encourage people to reconcile with God. Suppose someone asks you how? What would you say? How does a person reconcile with God?
 - d. Jeff closed with the famous scene from "Les Miserable" where the bishop's grace toward Jean Valjean causes him to reconcile with God. Who's someone in your life who seems alienated from God? How might you help them reconcile? What do they need to hear or see from you?

Ephesians 2:1-17

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— ¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.