

Special Feature: Homily by Alfredo Joiner

JESUS' ESSENTIAL TASKS (Ex 19:2-8; Mt 9:35-38)

INTRODUCTION: Good to say that my first thought in describing this reflection was: “Jesus’ Priorities.” Nonetheless, I decided on “Jesus’ Essential Tasks,” to make it sounds more to the heart of Moravians, since we share a rich historical heritage based on the following philosophical statement or motto: “In essentials, UNITY, in none essentials, LIBERTY, and in all things, LOVE. This is gladly memorized by a lot of Moravians. However, the problem is that when we ask a Moravian what are the essential things in which we should be united? There isn’t an agreement. Actually, we are in search of what Moravians should consider as “the Essentials.” This will be discussed in the Unity Synod to be held in 2009. (See The Moravian Magazine of March, 2005, p.8.)

If there is one thing I would like you to take with you from this message is your sincere response to the following question: What is your priority or the thing you consider to be essential in your Christian life? This morning as we take time to pull back and think about who we are and what we stand for, I would like to draw our attention to God’s inspiring words and concentrate on the summary, which Matthew made of Jesus’ ministry. I hope that we deepen our commitment and move to a new direction in our Christian practice as we look at what Jesus did, what we are doing and what we need to do in obedience to his call.

I. THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS FOR JESUS: From the beginning Moravians placed faith in Jesus Christ at the center of what it means to be Christian. By the help of God, such a conviction continues to be true for us. Therefore, it is important to find out what Jesus considered to be the most essential things for him.

A. Jesus went through all the towns and villages teaching (Mt. 9:35a)

1. You can always tell what is important to a person by what that person gives priority to in life: Job, country, institution, family wealth, fame, recreation, and so on. Matthew reveals that Jesus’ greatest priority was people. Therefore, his first essential task was to teach them all, for he did not hesitate to associate with people who were classified as sinners and outcast.
2. Jesus was not only considered as a teacher by his 12 disciples, but also by the official teachers of his time. In the context of when Jesus was eating at Matthews’ home, “When the Pharisees saw this; they asked his disciples, ‘why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’” Mt 9:11. In John’s Gospel also registers that the Pharisee Nicodemus who went to Jesus by night said: “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him” Jn 3:1-2.
3. Jesus was not a static teacher, who was only in one specific place teaching a small group of people, rather, he went through all the towns and villages of Palestine. The Gospel writers refer to at least thirty-five personal contacts Jesus had with persons face to face. He took

time to talk with people along the roadside, by a well, in the synagogues, and in friends' homes. It was important, for him to pass on the new teaching he had in order to transform the world of his time. Likewise, if we are to contribute in the change of our socio-political, religious and economical situation, we are to practice and teach God's principles where ever we are and where ever we go.

B. Preaching the good news of the kingdom (v. 35b).

1. Secondly, Jesus considered that proclamation of the good news of the kingdom was also essential. His preaching was about the good news because it was about the saving acts of God through him, which is sum up in Lk 4:18-19, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and to release the oppressed, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." There is a lot that can be said about this text, but for this morning I just want to state that this marks the core of Christianity and shows that our challenge is not an easy task as a lot of people think.
2. In Matthew chapter 13 we have 5 parables about the kingdom of God, which help us to understand that the kingdom preached by Jesus is the one in which the greatest command is love. Therefore, God's kingdom is in contrast to the kingdom of this world that functions by violence, intimidation, selfishness and demonic power. In which of these two kingdoms are you and I involved in at this time?
3. What good news do you have to tell your family, classmate, neighbors, and friends or to the unknown person you meet on the way? As the Hymn writer has written: "I love to tell the story of Jesus and his love..." If we are not sharing this marvelous gospel story of redemption and of God's unfolding love to all people as yet, today is a good day to start telling it to those who may have all the material things they need, but are lacking some deeper needs; Such as the meaning of their existence, direction for their life, forgiveness, hope, and love. Sometimes they are lonely, frustrated, depressed, and confused, and they long for wholeness and faith. Yes! You and I have a word of hope they need to hear, which we should gently, joyfully, and naturally share. We must not fail!

C. Healing every disease and sickness (v. 35c).

1. This statement refers to the power of Jesus to heal, which introduces Jesus' third essential task. In Greek, the same word, swzw, can mean, "Save" and "heal." Jesus healings can mean saving someone from a physical, emotional or spiritual affliction. Matthew includes more miracle stories than any other Gospel – There are 20 specific miracle stories in such a Gospel. In Matthew chapter 9 alone we read that Jesus healed a paralytic man (vv 1-8), a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years (vv. 20-22), raised a dead girl (vv 18-19, 23-25), recovered the sights of two blind men (vv. 27-31), and healed a man who

was demon-possessed and could not talk (vv. 32-33).

2. As Jesus the master teacher, preacher and healer of all times asked the two blind men: “Do you believe that I am able to do this? v. 28b. I ask you today: Do you believe that Jesus healed all those people? I do hope that your answers are positive as it was for the blind men, that by believing they received what they asked from Jesus. However, I would not be surprised if some of your answers were negative, for at Jesus’ time the Pharisees said “It is by the prince of demons that he drives our demons” v.34.
3. The crucial point is that our doubts and negative answers will not stop God from working out miracles through his followers of today. The church worships because it believes that its words about God are meaningful and should be shared within a community. As James Cone had said in his book *God of the Oppressed*, “the people believed that Jesus could conquer sorrow and wipe away the tears of pain and suffering...” The heart of every Christian needs to beat with a sense of urgency to share the love of God with others. Convinced that God is more than able to do more than what we can ever think about.
4. According to Matthew 9:36 Jesus is considered as the true shepherd, who has compassion on the harassed and helpless flock of his time. He understood that it was his vocation to be sent to them (Mt 10:5; 15:24). Therefore, he fulfilled his preaching, teaching and healing ministry with authority that was given by his father. Baron Friedrich von Hugel, a German philosopher, once wrote, “caring is everything; nothing matters but caring.” If caring is absent from our lives, we will never reach out to other people. Brothers and sisters, friends, who do you care for today?

II. JESUS INVITED HIS DISCIPLES TO FOLLOW THE SAME ESSENTIAL TASKS

(Mt 9:37-38)

- A. Matthew 9:35 emphasizes the continuity between the mission of Jesus and the mission of the disciples’ v37. This reveals that teaching, preaching, and healing are the reasons for the existence of Christians in the world.
- B. Jesus instructed his Disciples to pray for the Lord of the harvest (God) to send out laborers into the harvest (Matt 9:38). The response to such a prayer is the chosen, authorized and committed disciples as participants in God’s plan of salvation that were sent by God through Christ (Mt. 10:1-8). The early Christians were on fire for their Lord. In obedience, they wanted to share the good news of Christ with everyone they met. In Acts 5:42 points out, “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” This far, Jesus and his disciples’ practical examples show that a pastor should be a theologian, preacher, teacher and healer. Moreover, all Christians should be totally committed in extending God’s kingdom. We should ask our Lord for power and courage to never stray from this primary task of witnessing for him.
- C. ILLUSTRATION: Once a pig and a hen left the farm and went into town. Walking down

the street, they saw the sign: Ham and Eggs. The pig said to the hen: “Look there; for you that is just a contribution; but for me that is a total commitment.

What the world needs – whether it is church, business or education – is total commitment. The church needs members but over all it needs committed workers that are willing to be active in God’s harvest field, were the multitude are still been harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd as in the time of Moses (Num 27:17). And in the context of the prophet Ezekiel, “as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock” Ezekiel 34:8. This refers to the uncommitted church leaders and members of today, who are potential disciples but need to wake up and follow obediently in practical acts of teaching and preaching that will produce healing to the sick and needy ones.

- D. Jesus, the good shepherd has come extending his arms into the world to show us that God loves all people. This is our message: Come home. Receive God’s grace. Find a new beginning. God loves you. Come home. We must remember that God never said to any one, “Thou shall not witness.” This calls for all of us as a part of his body the Church to take a stand of conscience, and embrace his invitation and confront the challenges that face us in the world today. After, more than 115 years of worshiping in this temple, it is time to move in new directions and mission for this Moravian community to increase in numbers and in quality. Christianity is more than coming regularly to church; it is about commitment to Christ and his kingdom. Therefore, a good place to begin to be his faithful witness is among our family. Here is were we are to put our energy, time and heart, not just to keep the faith but to pass it on from generation to generation, as it is oriented in Deut 11:19. ILLUSTRATION: Once a Bishop wrote a circular letter to his pastors and asked if they would meet him for a “quiet day.” One of the pastor replied: “What my church needs is not a quiet day but an earthquake!”

This Church like so many of our Churches today may also need a spiritual earthquake or a new Pentecost. In order for that to happen here, each one of you should ask; What are some of the things which you can help to make this Vanderbilt community a more healthy place where outsiders would like to come and be a part of our celebrations? God continues calling each one of you by name and invites you to a faithful discipleship; perhaps in Sunday School, youth fellowship, choir, visitations, inviting others and extending to them a cordial welcome, or by voluntary work for Vacation Bible Studies...There will always be a place and activities for us to embody the spirit of Christ in the World. What is needed is that we be sincere and consistent with the promise we once made to our creator, on that unforgettable day when we rendered our life, wealth, motives, love, heart and our whole self and consecrated it to his faithful service. Acknowledging that the least we do in Jesus’ name will be precious in his sight. When we really care, we will find something to do and share. Many of God’s creatures are out there, longing to know that they are loved and can begin again.

CONCLUSION: Based on this reflection so far, we see that there isn't any doubt, that preaching, teaching, and healing were the three most essential activities in Jesus' life. Jesus did it all based on his deep concern and love for all people. The pages of the New Testament are filled with individuals who shared the good news about Christ. And as Moravians, we are always amazed and proud of how the first Moravian missionaries were profoundly engaged in taking God's good news through all the different towns and villages. They were conscious that it was not enough to admire Jesus as a great teacher, preacher and healer or as some great religious figure from the past, but to follow his unique example. Now it is your turn and mine to be witnesses. We are challenged to pass on the light about God's grace. Let us carry the light courageously and enthusiastically, lifting the torches of the marvelous Gospel high and carrying the faith, love and hope in Christ our Chief Elder always forward. Amen.

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FALL EVENTS FOCUSING ON MORAVIAN TOPICS

Online: MORAVIAN HERITAGE - 5 sessions with Bishop Arthur Freeman
Tuesdays, Sept. 27, October 4, 11, 18, 25 • 7-9 pm

Winston-Salem: WRITING A BOOK OF WORSHIP COMPANION
Moses Lectures in Moravian Studies - presented by Rev. Dr. Albert Frank
Archie K. Davis Center • Monday, October 10 • 9-1:30 pm

COMENIUS AND THE REFORM OF CHRISTIANITY
Moravian History Videoconference - presented by Rev. Dr. Craig Atwood
Sunday, October 16 • 3-5 pm (ET), 4-6 pm (CT)

Sturgeon Bay, WI: Location TBA

Winston-Salem: Salem College, Fine Arts Center, Videoconference Classroom
Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Seminary, Distance Learning Classroom

Online: EVANGELISM - 3 sessions with Bishop Arthur Freeman
Tuesdays, November 1, 8, 15 • 7-9 pm

Dover, OH: WRITING A BOOK OF WORSHIP COMPANION
Moses Lectures in Moravian Studies - presented by Rev. Dr. Albert Frank
First Moravian Church Dover • Sunday, November 6 • 2-6 pm

To register or for more information on these events
contact the Office of Continuing Education at Moravian Seminary at 800-843-6541.
See the Seminary's website for program description www.moravianseminary.edu.