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Text: None

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Epiphany 3

THE CHURCH IN ASIA

We are now in the season of Epiphany season, a season that reminds us that Christ is for all people. Even as an infant, Christ was revealed as the Savior of people in every nation when the Magi came from the east to worship him.

Jesus is for all, and people all over the world now follow him. Last week we took a look at the church in Africa and saw how social ministry was helping the church not only minister to human need, but also helping the church grow. Today we take a look at the church in Asia and there are two important lessons we can learn from these Christians.

There are 8.2 million Lutherans in Asia, which is more than in North America. Asia, however, is a vast continent with billions of people. Christians are in a minority in Asia, and because of that, they have had to learn how to be the church when the majority of the people around them are not Christians.

And that is something we can learn from them. Until recently, Christians enjoyed a privileged status in this country. But that is changing. Christians are now becoming a minority in this country, and so we need to learn from our sisters and brothers in Asia how to be the church in a pluralistic society.

As a tiny group in the midst of other religions, like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christians in Asia have learned to emphasize the proclamation of the gospel, the good news of God's mercy in Jesus Christ.

Among Christians in the west, such as Europe and North America, the gospel is often interpreted to mean working for justice or improving society or being a moral person. The role of Jesus is then reduced to being a great teacher or a perfect example of how to live. The people in Asia know that this is not the gospel. They know the root of the gospel is the message that Jesus came to save people from their sins. They know the gospel is about Christ who sacrificed his life in order to redeem people for God. Asian Christians know that proclaiming this gospel is the only way they can continue to exist in a pluralistic society.

As Christians become a minority in this country, it is all the more urgent that we focus on the proclamation of the gospel. People around us desperately need to hear the good news of what God is doing for them through Jesus Christ. They need to hear of God's grace and mercy that comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Asian Christians teach us the importance of keeping the gospel at the center of our ministry.

A second lesson we can learn from the Christians in Asia is the importance of lay ministry. Gideon Chang, former bishop of the Lutheran church in Malaysia said, that because of the multicultural and multi-religious backgrounds of the people in Asia, it is imperative to train and send lay missionaries. Bishop Chang knew that non-clergy are more easily welcomed by people of other faiths. He knew that lay people interact easily with friends, relatives, schoolmates, and colleagues at the workplace.

We need to do what the Christians in Asia are doing and place more emphasis on the ministry of lay people. We need to put more time and effort into training lay people to share their faith with others. As our society becomes more multicultural and more pluralistic, it is imperative that we use the gifts of all Christians in reaching out to others with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The church in Mongolia is a good example of what is happening in Asia. This church has grown from just a handful of people in 1990 to around 30,000 people today. Christianity in Mongolia has grown rapidly because the church works hard at equipping lay people to share the gospel with others.

It is not easy - Christians in Asia are often persecuted. They are kidnapped, jailed, beaten, raped, and even murdered. But these Christians are committed to Christ. As one young Christian in Pakistan said to her kidnappers, "I am a Christian, and if you want to kill me then kill me, but I will not accept Islam."

The Spirit of Christ is working mightily among these Christians.

In the Gospel reading today, we heard Jesus say, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19) This is the message Christians in Asia are sharing with their neighbors and this is the message that we too are sent to proclaim.

The message is about Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem, who was baptized in the Jordan River, who fed the hungry and healed the sick, who died on the cross and rose from the dead. He did it for the people of Asia and he did it for you and me. He has redeemed us and made us into his Body. He has joined us with Christians everywhere in his Body and given us a mission to the world..

May Christ's Spirit dwell in us and lead us to boldly share the good news with others.