

Faith – Talking It to Death

Matthew 6:1, 5, 7- 8

(Communion – June 7, 2009)

It seldom happens to me any more, but one part of being a Christian minister that used to bug me was the knee-jerk reactions of people I had just met when they figured out that I was a clergyman. The assumption was that he or she needed now, to regurgitate everything religious that he had ever heard or learned. I would end up having to listen, for example, to a detailed description of the wonderful Bible his grandmother owned, or how extraordinarily devout had been his mother's older sister, or who this person thought were the kind of people headed for hell (and "don't you agree, Reverend?"), or how obvious it was that we certainly are "in the final days before the rapture and Jesus' return," or perhaps a mawkish description of when she had "found the Lord" (I didn't even know he was lost.) In other words, I seemed, unintentionally, to trigger an avalanche of gratuitous God-talk that I suppose was assumed would impress a minister and, who knows, earn the talker some eternal "brownie points."

It doesn't take many experiences like that to pound home the extent to which the Christian faith, instead of something lived, is commonly turned into an elaborate exercise of talking – a verbal, religious massage that feels and sounds faintly spiritual, but has little or nothing to do with where life really takes place. It's extraordinarily difficult to fit that sort of thing, with the fact that at the core of our faith, the principle is that of God's word becoming flesh --being lived, rather than being one more puddle of religious rhetoric, jargon and ritual. Now, mind you, this is coming from one who, in beginning to start to pack up his office, started looking through a pile of sermons which have accumulated over the years. After totaling the number of words on a page, multiplying by six pages per manuscript, multiplying by 50 Sundays per year, multiplying by almost 24 years, I figured that, in my time here with you, I have spoken in my sermons about 2,700,000 words at a very minimum. And here I am, preaching about talking faith to death. Mind you, I hope that the Holy Spirit was present in at least a number of those times. Sometimes saying it right, obsessing over saying it right, comes at the expense of living it well.

Listen, for example, to this jargon-loaded paragraph from a religious pamphlet I picked up and liberated from a waiting room table one day. It said, "The Gospel tells us that though the Blood of the Lamb, Jesus, who is the one, eternal foundation, we can be saved from the hell which is prepared for the unregenerate. At the moment we are saved, we are forever set free from the curse of original sin. In believing that Jesus has atoned for us in our fallen state, descendants of Adam as we are, now redeemed, we become worthy of God's saving grace and available to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Thus reconciled, we are no longer alienated by lust and vanity, and now walk in the glory of the Lord.

For one to reject this saving gift is to remain in our fallen state, in which, without Jesus, a person is a member of Satan's kingdom, is unclean, is unregenerate, is spiritually dead, and is cut off from God."

Maybe that tangle of religious sounds works for you, but it doesn't for me. It bounces off my brain like hail stones off a tin roof. In no way does it express my faith and understanding. It just doesn't speak to me. Moreover, you shouldn't lose any sleep over it if it doesn't speak to you either. The fact is, Jesus, himself, showed no appetite for such abstruse, abstract, obscure, enigmatic verbal religious formulations. It's precisely what I take it to mean, when he warns his followers against endlessly babbling and piling up empty phrases as a way of demonstrating their faith and devotion.

If you were to go back and read it, you will not find, in his conversations and teachings, any talk about "orthodoxy," "sanctification," "atonement," "propitiation," "original sin," even the Trinity which we observe today, or any other esoteric rhetoric of the sort that has been piled upon Christianity. It's just not there.

I suspect, in fact, that a lot of what made Jesus seem so refreshing, so intelligible and so "down-to-earth" was the fact that he wasn't very religious by what were then (and are often now) the standard kinds of religiousness.

One can see it, even when skimming over what he talked about --his parables, for example. They had to do with taxation, with family problems, with a mugging on a lonely stretch of road, with the guest list for a dinner party, with investments, with employer-employee relations, with warehousing, with dirt farming, with sheep-raising, with personal indebtedness and yet other such every-day issues and matters.

I don't know about you, but I find that both enlightening and very reassuring. Supposedly religious jargon, supernatural double-talk, and many of the belief-formulas that go unquestioned, are not anywhere near as nourishing as they are "cracked up to be."

In one of my sermons in Clarion, Iowa on a broadcast over a county radio station, I told a story about a woman who was dying in a London sanitarium. She was only thirty but appeared much older.

She and her four younger siblings had lost both of their parents to an epidemic when she was only 14. They were left with a cottage in a slum area. At that time there was very little in the way of assistance or intervention for children in such circumstances. Determined to keep the five of them together, clothed, fed, and in school, she resorted to begging, taking in laundry, and working as a cleaning woman. When that wasn't enough, she had to take a 12-hour-a-day job in a mill. The pay was low and the working conditions horrible, but it kept them alive and got her younger brothers and sisters through the next decade.

Now, though, she was dying of tuberculosis. Her body was worn out. Her hands, in particular, looked terrible, were gnarled, cracked and ulcerated from the years of doing laundry, house cleaning and from the punishing mill-work.

A London mission woman came through the ward one day and stopped at her bed. After a few conversational exchanges, this woman asked her whether she had been saved –had accepted Jesus as her personal savior. The woman shook her head, telling this mission lady that she had never had time for church or to pursue religious matters; that until she had ended up here in the sanitarium, she had worked every moment, seven days a week, trying to keep herself and her brothers and sisters alive and provided for.

But her visitor persisted, pointing out that she had very little time to “get right with God;” that very soon she would be standing before God in that great judgment hall without having been saved. “What will you do then,” she demanded to know.

Holding up her hands, the dying woman wearily replied, “I guess I’ll just show him my hands.”

The story, for me, quite powerfully addresses the matter of “God’s word made flesh,” versus “flesh-spouting words.”

In any case, the week after that sermon, someone who had heard it on the radio, sent me an incensed letter, supposedly setting me straight. He didn’t quite say it this way, but the gist of it was that the mission worker was absolutely right; that if this woman died without accepting Jesus as her savior, that notwithstanding all she had done and given, she still stood condemned before God. His letter went on to say that for me to tell a story like that, implying that her sacrifices and caring might somehow be enough in God’s eyes, and excuse her from being properly “saved” jeopardized the eternal welfare of anyone who heard that radio sermon.

I certainly don’t claim to know everything about God’s perspective and God’s ways with us. But one thing of which I’m absolutely certain, is that the God we came to know in Jesus, never puts religious formulas, wordy doctrines or man-made creeds ahead of the “lived truth” of flesh-and-blood human beings. That dying woman’s scarred, reddened, worn-out hands and “spent” body, did indeed reveal truth infinitely beyond what the most eloquent God-talk ever can or ever will.

This story touches on it too. One bitterly cold day in London, the wife of an English clergyman noticed a small boy standing on the sidewalk grating above an air vent outside of a bakery next to the church parsonage. Despite the cold, the boy was wearing no shoes. His feet were bright red from exposure, and badly chapped. “Where are your shoes,” she asked him. “Lady, I ain’t got no shoes,” he replied. “Come with me,” she said, leading him to a nearby store where she bought him some heavy shoes and warm socks. The boy was incredulous—speechless with delight.

While she was finishing the purchase, he ran exuberantly out of the store, without even saying “thank you.” This was a bit disappointing to her. But as she started home, he came running back and breathlessly exclaimed, “Lady, I forgot to thank you. Thank you so much for these shoes. Then he paused, a little awkwardly, and finally said, “Can I ask you something?” She nodded and he asked, hesitantly, “Lady, are you God’s wife?”

Now SHE was speechless for a moment and then stammered, “Oh no...of course not. God doesn’t have...um..uh..I’m just one of God’s children, maybe like a daughter of God.” The little boy smiled and nodded knowingly and said, “Well, I knowed that you must be some kin to Him.”

There too, without any religious commercials or other supposedly sacred babble, was the raw power of God’s word made flesh in a woman in a shoe store!

It’s not that the spoken words, the verbal expressions of faith and devotion, the shared thoughts, the reasonings and the devout reflections that become a part of faith for the people of god, are all empty and useless. They certainly aren’t.

But when the words, the talk, the believings become the “whole show,” as they VERY easily do, then we have it exactly backwards. Jesus didn’t come among us to show us how to talk more effectively ABOUT God –how to do marvelous, religious, verbal gymnastics. He came to direct us toward living fully, abundantly and effectively as sons and daughters of God.

What does that look like? You already know, if you think about it. It has to do with your careful nourishing of your appetite for people rather than things, with your willingness to forgive and to accept forgiveness, with your generosity, with the persistence of your hope, with the sense of humor you maintain about yourself and about the crazy way life sometimes unfolds for you, with the meaning that you create out of ordinary moments, with your willingness to take risks, with your willingness to make mistakes, and your determination to bounce back from the things that “just kill you.”

Those and yet more are the REAL ways that faith is shown and expressed –the way in which God’s WORD is spoken to the life around you and me MOST OF THE TIME, without your having to speak a single holy-sounding word.

So why am I harping on this? Just this. If, by any chance, you are one of those who has felt a little spiritually defective because you just don’t seem to get the hang of sounding very Christian or spiritual (at least not compared to others you know whose conversation is heavily sprinkled with religious claims and certainties), DON’T WORRY ABOUT IT. If what faith really is, is alive and at work in you, it will be expressed and lived through you, in what is God’s own unique way for you.

And if it isn’t, there’s no amount of God-talk –even eloquent God-talk –that makes it happen.