

## THE TROUBLE WITH THE CHURCH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 31, 2010

Scripture: Luke 4:16-30,  
I Corinthians 13:1-13

I was looking through some of the old *Church Tower* issues that were out for the Tartan Fair and I looked at the January, 1945 publication.

Now January, 1945 was just a few months before the end of World War II. The attack on Pearl Harbor took place on December 7, 1941, so the nation had been at war for four years. Within a month, Marines would take Iwo Jima, and in August the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki would bring the war to a conclusion.

It's been sixty five years since January, 1945. Val Moldenhawer was pastor at that time and that issue of the *Tower* included the calendar for the week of January 14<sup>th</sup>. A group called the Crusaders met in the Club Room for a program with the subject, "The Necessity of Christ." We wouldn't have a group called the Crusaders today. It's a period in world history that is considered offensive if interfaith relations are to be furthered. But during World War II the word had cachet.

Brownies met on Tuesday and Wednesday. Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts on Friday. And there was a College and Business Women's Club that met for supper that week. The supper cost 60 cents. And an announcement advised all the men and women in the armed services to go to the entrance at the North aisle after worship and the young people of the church would take them to lunch.

Val Moldenhawer had a sermon in that issue entitled, "What it Means to Believe in the Church." You wouldn't let me preach a sermon like he did any more. Well, you might... but it would likely be my last. Not because of the topic, but because the language was so stilted and formal that it's terribly boring by modern standards. That style of preaching sounds pompous and bloated now. Dr. Moldenhawer takes a swipe at the Quakers in the sermon, which I wish he hadn't. And his view of the church is so perfect that I barely recognize it.

I should say however, that Dr. Moldenhawer warned against statements like the one I just made, statements that identify the warts of the church. At one point in the sermon he says,

It has long seemed to me a singularly graceless thing for a minister standing in the pulpit, and, by virtue of the place and the hour, heavily indebted to the Church for his freedom of utterance, to use his liberty with such light esteem as to prate of her fault, who, whatever else she is, is surely his spiritual Alma Mater. So let it be granted that the faults are there, and that my knowledge that this is so, does not abate in the least my love and my devotion."<sup>1</sup>

Well, I too, love the church, for all its faults; notwithstanding its faults. I love it best for its virtues. But there are faults in the church and there is trouble sometimes.

I say this with some fear and trembling on a Sunday when we receive new members, and on the day of our annual meeting. But it's true, the church does have trouble some times. I emailed my sermon topic to the staff along with the scripture passages earlier this week. And the sermon title, "The Trouble With the Church" evoked from Barbara Davis the email reply, "It sounds like a long sermon."

The truth is there have always been problems in the church, not necessarily First Church though in the days of Dr. Fosdick there were many problems not so much within the congregation but with the presbytery. (Some things never change!)

One need only read Paul's letter to the Galatians to see his exasperation with that congregation's lack of faithfulness. Or read Corinthians to grasp the dissention and disagreement on what we might call the church budget, benevolences, stewardship, foreign missions, even who should join the church and who should take communion. The church is no stranger to trouble, to internal strife and disagreement.

Take that passage today from Luke's gospel for example. Jesus was in Nazareth, where he had grown up. He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the scriptures. He opened the scroll to that section from Isaiah where it says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free."

He rolled up the scroll and sat down to preach. That was the way they preached in those days, sitting down. It was more conversational, more teaching than preaching. He said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

And they liked that sermon in Nazareth. Luke says, "All spoke well of him." After all he was Joseph and Mary's boy, the carpenter's son, and he'd turned out well.

It would have been fine if he'd stopped there with his little sermon, but like many preachers, even Jesus didn't know when to stop, or maybe it was his intention all along to say what he said next.

He went on to say that a prophet is not welcome in his own country. And to prove the point, he said that in the days when there was a famine in Israel, with lots of widows, Elijah was not sent to Israel but to Gentiles, to outsiders, in fact, to a widow in Sidon. And when there was an epidemic of leprosy in Israel in the time of Elisha, no one in Israel was cleansed of their leprosy, but only Naaman, a Syrian, another Gentile.

And the folks in the synagogue, the people who knew Jesus and thought he had spoken so well, and who were not much enamored of Gentiles, were enraged at the cheekiness of this upstart amateur theologian. They got a mob together and drove him out to a dangerous precipice where they were ready to throw him off a cliff, they were so angry. But Luke says, "He passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

Now here is Jesus in his first sermon infuriating the folks in the synagogue, making them so angry they were ready to kill him, feeling that he was blaspheming the faithfulness of God and the integrity of Israel.

He had challenged one of their fundamental beliefs. They all knew, or at least believed, that God loved Israel and that God would never leave Israel helpless. Israel, after all, was God's chosen people, bearers of the covenant to Abraham. They didn't want to hear that God had ever done anything good for the rest of the world, pagans and Gentiles and unbelievers, the uncircumcised, those outside the covenant.

There's trouble in the church... when the preacher says something with which folks disagree. When the preacher declares that God loves the enemy as much as God loves the friend. It doesn't go over very well. And yet, Jesus said, "Pray for your enemies. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Do not resist an evildoer," he said, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well."

It was counter cultural, this gospel that Jesus offered. It was good news to some and troublesome to others, and eventually it did him in. He offended the powers that be, the temple authorities, the scribes and Pharisees. "He ate with sinners and tax collectors," they said. And of course, he did.

And if you really try to follow in the way he walked, it might cause trouble in the church, because it challenges so much local theology. The theology of the hometown. A theology that reduces the presence and redemption of God to our people and to our size. When Jesus stood up that day in Nazareth he didn't sound like a homeboy anymore. Didn't sound like he'd graduated from the local high school. He talked as if he was from somewhere else, somewhere larger with more expansive borders and broader rules for forgiveness and inclusion.

He made it clear that God loves Gentiles and he spoke of God in ways that had never occurred to them before. He widened the circle of God's love to include everyone, and when they heard it in Nazareth it sounded better in theory than it did in practice. Because in practice it meant that Elijah had been sent beyond the hometown folks to the outsiders to care for a Gentile woman. And in the time of Elisha, God's healing grace had passed by all the hometown folks to embrace a Syrian, an outsider. It's not easy when you realize that God loves and forgives and redeems more passionately and more completely than we ever can.

Father Giancarlo Sivieri was – and perhaps still is – the priest of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Grosseto, Italy in Tuscany. Every year Father Sivieri places a crèche outside the basilica.

During Advent a few years ago, Father Sivieri positioned alongside the shepherds a small replica of Osama bin Laden. Much to the good Father's surprise this was a very controversial thing to do. People criticized him vociferously, and not only the members of the parish but also the local newspaper and the bishop thought this was a bad idea.

When asked what he was thinking when he did it, Father Sivieri said he believed that Jesus was born to redeem every person in the world, and Osama bin Laden was one of them.<sup>2</sup>

I guess Father Sivieri had been reading that part of the gospel that remembers Jesus said, “Pray for your enemies. Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.”

One day Jesus was beset by a mob of scribes and Pharisees near the temple, a mob that was chasing a woman who threw herself at Jesus’ feet. She had been caught *in flagrante delicto* committing adultery and the scribes had stones in their hands ready to administer the capital punishment authorized by the holiness code in Leviticus.

But Jesus, sizing up the situation, decided to override the hometown theology and gave authorization to *that scribe or Pharisee who had never sinned*. Needless to say, the stones dropped at the feet of the righteous folks among the pillars of the Temple. One scholar who has written on the interpretation of this story suggests this account should not be called “the story of the woman taken in adultery” it should be called the story of “the repentance of the sinful men.”

It’s not easy being the church. It’s easier in theory than it is in practice. Because the church is not a place unaffected by the values of the world. There can be disagreements, dissention, fights and sides drawn in contentious matters in the church. Paul spent most of his public ministry dealing with one problem or another in those fledgling congregations he founded in the Mediterranean basin. The letters to the Galatians the Corinthians the Romans all were addressed to troubles in the church, and without them we would not have some of the best theology in the Christian faith, the writings of Paul. So maybe it’s not all bad that sometimes there are disagreements in the church. Because sometimes it’s the disagreements in the church which become the means by which theology moves beyond the hometown limitations, and people sharpen their understanding of how to be the church and what it is to be a Christian in a context and with a question where it counts. Maybe God gives us tough challenges and hard questions and difficult matters to decide because the kingdom of the world is in conflict with the kingdom of heaven and we need to see it baldly.

They are, after all, like two tectonic plates beneath us, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the world. And when they intersect there is disruption. Things don’t go smoothly. But it is in the midst of these difficult collisions that faith is proven, and our beliefs are clarified, and we come to understand better the requirements of discipleship.

You’ve heard me quote Kathleen Norris on the church before, but some of you might remember, so I’ll quote her again. She writes so beautifully of the nature of what it is to be the church and she writes out of her own church experience.

We are not individuals who have come together because we are like minded. That is not a church but a political party. We are like most

healthy churches, I think, in that we can do pretty well when it comes to loving and serving God, each other, and the world; but God help us if we have to agree about things. I could test our “uniformity” by suggesting a major remodeling of the sanctuary, or worse, that Holy of Holies – the church kitchen. But I value my life too much.... The Church is like the Incarnation itself, a shaky proposition. It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel, stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That is why it is called the body of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

And that’s our hope as a church, that we are greater than the sum of our parts, because that greater part is the Lord in whose name we have been called into service.

It’s okay sometimes if the church has disagreements and it’s not always clear as to what our next steps should be, if we do not lose sight of the fact that winning the argument or putting down the other person’s point of view is not our purpose. In the church, any disagreement is meant to help us sharpen our discernment of faithful discipleship. Our experience of life together, after all, is what it is to be the body of Christ.

The trouble with the church is that it is a human institution, subject to all the foibles and weaknesses and temptations and “I told you so’s” to which we, as sinful human beings, are subject. That’s the bad news.

But the good news is that we are also the body of Christ on earth, the raw stuff with which God has to work, the means of the gospel coming to the world.

A lot is riding on our shoulders and it’s a burden. But the good thing is that the one who has called us into the church has already told us that if we stick with him, he will help us with that burden. “Come to me all you that labor and are heavy laden,” he said, “and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Hold onto that as we strive to be the church today, welcoming these new members, electing new officers, conducting the business of the church, and living into the experience of being tested in our discipleship. For we are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it.

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<sup>1</sup> J.V. Moldenhawer, "What it Means to Believe in the Church". The Church Tower, January, 1945. New York: First Presbyterian Church, 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey Cox, **When Jesus Came to Harvard**. (2004) p 77.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Norris, **Amazing Grace**. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) 271-272.