

Moving Toward the Light
April 2, 2006

“The light is with you a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light believe in the light, so that you may become children of the light.” John 12: 35-36

I could tell you about the ten days Linda and I spent away from you and away from Maine. How I officiated at a wedding in Pinehurst North Carolina. Of visits with College and Seminary friends along the route. Of a harrowing car ride with Linda’s 86 year old uncle through the streets of Birmingham Alabama. I would be glad to share more and in greater detail, but this is the Fifth Sunday in Lent and I need to give a sermon, not present a travelogue.

However, I do want to begin by referring to the sign I saw in front of a church. As we drove into Birmingham for supper, this large, soon to be illuminated sign appeared to my right, inviting the wider community to come to church. You must remember that down south the first question you are asked is, “What church do you attend?” Well, this sign invited people to come and experience this church and its “Authentic Worship.” I spent some of the 1,300 miles we drove home considering what “authentic worship” might be.

What do you think “authentic worship” is? The first thing that came to my mind was the story of the Velveteen Rabbit. You know, where it speaks about becoming real. Certainly to be authentic is to be real. Remember the famous advice that the Skinhorse gives the Rabbit: “Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

I am not too sure that this applies to worship, although (don’t get me wrong) I do think there are plenty of people in church who have been loved silly. However, “authentic worship” must mean something more than that we have been transformed into shabby looking, hairless creatures. Although at times many of us may appear to be a little bit of both!

The church sign implies, however, that authentic worship can lead worshippers to a place that, perhaps, other forms of worship do not (or simply cannot). Because they lack...authenticity! Does authenticity, then, derive from the form of the worship service? There are many who claim a traditional, familiar style of worship should be replaced by a newer style of praise worship, with lots of singing and a power point presentation on the screen. Yet, as a minister, I tend to be swayed not by the style, but rather by what substance. Does authenticity have to do with the Message and how the Word (capital W) is presented within the church? I like to think so.

The passage from John is interesting in a variety of ways, but in one way that we simply might overlook. As the passage begins in verse 20, some who are Greek come to Philip and ask if they can see Jesus. News has certainly spread about him and people are curious. However, to see him is more than mere fascination. They request to see him, because they have heard Jesus is the Son of God. Indeed, Jesus makes this claim as part of his response to their request. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Son of Man or Son of God – it is all the same! Jesus is the Christ. And this is what the Greeks have heard about by word of mouth – that Jesus is the Word through which all of God’s wisdom and love is interpreted. “Whoever serves me, God the Father will honor.” This is what they have come to see!

The Greeks come therefore because they thirst for a better way. They hunger to hear the Word (capitol W). They long for lives that are rooted in a foundation, not one of mythic Greek gods, but one that cannot be shaken or destroyed. They come to find God in the message of the Christ. Which is the same exact reason why people come to church today! To hear what is authentic, lasting and true!

I will probably never know for sure what the Birmingham Church considered to be “authentic worship.” I trust that it was a commitment to study the word of love as demonstrated by the Good News of Jesus. I am judgmental in thinking it had to do, in their minds, perhaps with the type of service or method of delivery. And I am also judgmental (as you have learned, I can be very opinionated at times) as I consider not only what “authentic” might be, but also their definition of “worship,” which all too often can unfortunately be our definition as well. For we too call the time we spend on Sunday mornings Worship, although this scarcely begins to define worship, which is the daily consideration of our relationship to God.

I like to think that what we do at Sunday worship is only a part of a worship encounter that serves to uplift God’s word. Perhaps it should be viewed as the prelude that commissions us for remainder of the week, when we live out God’s sacred promises. So, if worship is to be authentic, it becomes the way we follow Jesus in the way we live and love. So that then...every day is worship!

For example, it is important during worship to draw upon the Biblical recourses that define our mandate as an outreach to the poor. Jim Wallis, of the Sojourners movement, speaks about the 2,000 verses in the Bible that are about poor people and that “fighting poverty is a moral values issue.” Surely, we must preach about poverty, but obviously there is no sense preaching about the God of Justice if we aren’t willing to live justly ourselves. What we claim on Sunday must be how we worship God each and every day! This has everything to do with our moral values, our respect of creation, our ethics, and our spirituality and prayer life. It becomes a question of whether or not we have an integrity as a Christian people. Is worship an act completed in one hour? Of course not - it is a daily endeavor that seeks to praise and glorify God in all we do?

The Greeks are told not only where to find Jesus (and hence God), but also what to do about it when they find him. “Whoever serves me,” Jesus says “must follow me.” Those who choose discipleship in Christ must follow the cross, even if that means bearing the cross to death itself. God will glorify those who give their lives for others and who seek to be faithful servants, day in and day out.

I am always struck by the words from Man of La Mancha from the song “The Impossible Dream.” “To dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe, to bear with unbearable sorrow, to run where the brave dare not go...”

A bit too schmaltzy, I know, but I am always taken by the valiant vision depicting Don Quixote. “To run where the brave dare not go!” It may be pure foolishness to attempt to follow the way of Jesus – such a way may inevitably lead to a cross. But we cannot be authentic if we refuse to try. If we deny our responsibility to live out our lives in relationship to the God who will move heaven and earth for our sake. If we respond half-heartedly or without passion to a gospel that calls us to live faithfully, while confronting the evils of our society. To “worship authentically” is to seek the often elusive light that is God’s hope for humankind in an ever threatening world.

Ask yourselves: have I moved any closer to the light during this Lenten Season? Am I more convinced now, than I was a few weeks ago, that I must serve the God of unconditional love? That I am authentic only as the Easter Sunday Morning experience transforms my daily relationship with everyone I come in contact! To answer in the affirmative...is to willingly follow Jesus as he seeks to worship and glorify God.

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