

Sent Forth in Wisdom
8/20/06
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Let me begin by sharing with you a light hearted story of love and religious sentiment that I recently came across:

A man was in a tavern, downing them faster than usual when a stranger on the barstool next to him, feeling concerned, asked, "What's wrong?"

The man said, "I'm drinking to the memory of my wife. She was a saint on earth. She went to church every single morning, spent her days reading and quoting the Scriptures, sang hymns and psalms all evening, filled our house with religious statues and paintings, and invited priests and nuns to dinner three times a week."

"She sounds like an angel," the second man commented. And trying to be compassionate added, "I suppose the good Lord took her early to Himself."

"No," the first man replied. "I strangled her."

All in good fun here. All in jest! Because some Sundays I come bearing a joke. It is good to hear you laugh and, of course, coming to church and going away happy is a healthy thing. Yet, the message this morning is really little different than the one I gave last week. Once you leave here on a Sunday morning, your task is to share the good news of Jesus. Now that doesn't mean you can't repeat a joke that the minister tells. That can be a good thing. Or who you saw in church or what you enjoyed at coffee hour. Maybe the music or the children's time or whatever. But most important for you is to remember that it is God's word of love sends you forth into the world around you.

Now that may essentially repeat some of what I said last Sunday, but I mean to invite you to take the message even more to heart this week. That there is a need - an urgent need - to be evangelists who study the word of God and can be wise and sensitive in sharing it. This is so crucial, because we live today in a world in which there are evangelists spreading a gospel that, I think, gives credence to claims that are human and not divine in origin.

For example, there are those voices in the church that said Hurricane Katrina was God's judgment upon the decadence of our way of life. That New Orleans needed to be cleansed of its sin. Just as there were a few voices that claimed 9/11 was God's judgment upon those who condoned homosexuality as an appropriate lifestyle. We have Jerry Falwell to thank for that one! Worse, there are people who accept these claims as true, because they come from those who speak for the church and they hear no alternative wisdom.

The readings from scripture today speak to the issue of wisdom. God's wisdom and our wisdom. I seldom use Proverbs as a text, but today's lesson is powerful. Wisdom has built a house. Indeed, God has built a temple of love with mighty pillars! Sacrifices have been made to this God. The table has been set. The angel voices announce to all that here with God all will discover the pathway to right living. "You that are simple, turn in here." To the uneducated the word also comes, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity and live. Walk in the way of insight." (Proverbs 9: 1-6)

We are to come into this temple...into this church...to be fed by a word that will grant people insight. Insight into what? Into God's love and grace and purpose. It is important to go forth with that in mind. That we have come to God's table and there we have learned to value and appreciate what is God's purpose for humanity. If we have any doubt about God's purpose, we have the wisdom of the Bible at our disposal. We have the commandments and teachings of the Hebrew Canon, as well as the life and example of Jesus to draw upon. John's gospel picks up right where we left off in Proverbs, explaining what we will find at the table as we dine together. Jesus speaks, "Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

As always, John is speaking in images. Sure, as Christians we will be served bread. But this bread, a reminder of Jesus, will feed us a new word – the word we need to know in order to live. This word will instruct us in the meaning of sacrificial and unconditional love, basically in how to live for others and not for oneself. We will feel empowered by a Christ who calls us to equality, lives without the scorn of divisive prejudice and contempt for others who choose to see things differently than we do. Jesus speaks to us a word of peace, one that shares a common hope in justice for all and harmony for humanity.

With this wisdom, learned and experienced, we should be able to counteract the false prophets who today preach a gospel filled, really, with hate. There are Christians who claim that God's desire is that those outside the faith be thrown into Hell. They cannot possibly be reading the same Bible as me. We must go forth from this church testifying to the God who out of love calls together all people – Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian – from differing faith journeys. The God of Love, that we know in this church, must not be equated with a God bent on a Day of Judgment that will condemn to eternal punishment all who seek another lifestyle. The God we speak of here is tolerant and caring, full of compassion, a God who acts by healing and not by tearing apart. When we are sent forth, we must speak of this God, and not another.

I know that what I have said today can come across as arrogance. That I am judging other people and other groups, those who view the gospel differently and come to different conclusions and they, of course, are not here to defend themselves. Well, that is all certainly true. However, I don't pretend to have all the answers. My Biblical background is minimal compared to many. Yet, when I look at Jesus and the work he did through his ministry, I can't voice agreement with those who somehow choose to exclude rather than include; those who believe natural disasters represent God's purpose; those who claim Christianity is God's only chosen pathway to spiritual salvation as well as world peace.

So, make no mistake how important I think it is that we go wisely into the world. Educated by the gospel of Jesus. As those who have studied the Word and take it to heart. We must speak with faith and conviction against those who view Jesus as one who comes through the violence of his power to make everyone submit to God. If I recall correctly, this is not the Jesus I read about, riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and soon wearing a crown of thorns on the cross.

Last week, I spoke of evangelism as being sent forth to acquaint others with the joy of the gospel. This week, I remind you of the importance of this task. As important as it is to bring people into the church, it is just as important that we not lure them here with a gospel that splinters people apart. For God loves us all, is full of embrace and yearns for peace. Go forth to retell a joke if you will, but remember that God's unconditional love for all is no joke whatsoever!