

Eucharist
September 17, 2003
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Mark 8:27–38 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

I am not generally given to political sermons. Usually I focus on my grandsons, on Sam and Ben, and what they are teaching me about God. Usually my theme is God's unconditional love and admiration for the creation and for all of us creatures who swarm over this little world that is our home. I have written about my problems even using the word "sin" because it contributes I think to the misapprehension that a God of justice sits on some throne watching us all like Big Brother, waiting for us to slip up, breathing wrath at us, and threatening punishment. I'm much bigger on mercy than on justice, as one might expect of someone who teaches pastoral care. Gary the softy—someone who tends toward tolerant, non-judgmental, live-and-let-live permissiveness much more than moral indignation. So I'm not one who generally preaches political sermons.

But when I read and re-read this Gospel, from Mark, I could not dissociate my thoughts from the current administration in Washington, the Bush administration. George W. Bush has portrayed himself as something of a born-again Christian, someone whose greatest hero—the person who has had the most influence on his life he says—is Jesus; someone who laces his speeches with biblical references and religious rhetoric; someone who appears to pray frequently and who, we are told, has promoted regular Bible study at the White House, Bible study which White House staffers hear about when they miss it.

And when I read this Gospel account from Mark, I began to wonder how President Bush would understand it—how he would conduct a Bible study about it in the White House with Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Secretary of Defense

Donald Rumsfeld? I'm trying to visualize George Bush leading a Bible study of this passage with Paul Wolfowitz or with his passel of Texas-oil-based economic advisors:

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What interpretation, I wonder, would our president provide for these words of Jesus? I'd love to be there to hear it. How would he apply this passage to his tax-cut crusade?

Paul Krugman, a regular New York Times columnist who is also a professor of economics at Princeton University, writes that Bush's incessant promotion of tax cuts is just the latest and most virulent campaign in a 25-year-long crusade against taxes. Bush's plan has meant massive tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans—Americans who wheel and deal in the multimillions—, accompanied by dribbling little tax cuts or none at all for most Americans. The result is growing astronomical deficits. But to Bush and to the tax-cut crusaders who are his allies, that's just fine, because their aim, says Krugman, is ultimately the dismantling of Social Security and Medicare—that great humane safety net that was put in place during the Great Depression of the 1930s and that most of us, the non-wealthy Americans, have come to take for granted.

If the Bush tax-cuts prevail, Krugman sees an America a couple of decades from now in which old people become the poorest Americans, as they were before Social Security, a country in which poor Americans go without even basic health care, a country in which only those who can afford expensive private schools can give their children a decent education.

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Martin Luther associates this passage with the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. He connects it to Romans 15:2 "Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor;" He quotes 1 Cor. 13:5, "Love does not insist on its own way;" and Philippians 2:4 "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Luther comments that "the commandment [to love the neighbor as oneself] seems to be speaking of the perverse love because of which everyone, forgetful of his neighbor, looks only to his own interests. This, on the other hand, becomes the right kind of love when one forgets oneself and serves only one's neighbor."¹

¹Luther, M. (1999, c1964). *Vol. 27: Luther's works, vol. 27 : Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 5-6; 1519, Chapters 1-6* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Ga 5:15). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

I saw the movie “Bowling for Columbine” last week. It’s the documentary about the love affair with guns in the United States. Michael Moore, the film-maker, continually asks in the film why Americans are so prone to violence, why Americans murder one another at such alarming rates. In particular, why do Canadians, who own almost as many guns as Americans, kill one another at a much lower rate than Americans do? When Michael Moore asked some Canadian teenagers how they would answer that question, they gave two answers: 1) Canadians believe in working out differences by negotiating some sort of compromise, while Americans just get angry and shoot one another. 2) Canadians have a huge safety net to assure medical care and basic human services to all their citizens. They said every human being has a right to health care and basic food and shelter. So they think of Canada as a more compassionate, communal, and caring society than the United States.

Are they right? What we are hearing more today in our country, particularly from the White House, is that each person should get to keep the hard-earned wages that he or she earns and not have to hand it over to the government. What they mean is that no one should have to hand over any of their wealth to help those who have less. Each of us should be responsible for ourselves and not expect others to take care of us. Each of us should have our own private health plan, our private investment portfolio for retirement. Each of us should have the right to keep all our money and property for ourselves and do with it whatever we please, regardless of the public welfare. Am I my brother’s or sister’s keeper? No way! And I’m surely not the keeper of some other lazy free-loader’s brother or sister or child or grandma or grandpa!

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I wonder today how we at a seminary should be addressing the gap between Christian values and governmental policies. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and at this seminary we are committed to finding a public voice, a public ministry, a way to mobilize our hands and voices in ministry to our society and world, and not merely to the members of our local congregations. How do we do that appropriately and effectively? How do we learn what we need to know in order to make informed responsible decisions in the public realm? How do we respect and support the separation of Church and State, while addressing and confronting the State when its policies violate Christian values, and especially when political leaders use Christian language to conceal their actual motives, for example, when our president uses phrases like “compassionate conservatism” to deceive the public by talking concern and care while simultaneously promoting policies that will diminish and deny basic human services to millions of Americans in need?

As the apostle James says today, “No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are

made in the likeness of God.” It’s easy to invoke the name of Jesus while designing programs in back rooms that will curse poor and ordinary folks with lives of ignominy and desperation.

So as I think of how to preach on the Gospel today in this political context, it’s hard for me to rest content with my usual affirmations of God’s love for all. That word from James in last week’s lesson still haunts me: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” What good are compassionate words if they are not linked to equally compassionate deeds?

It seems to me that our church and this seminary are called to do more than sit in our chapels reminding ourselves of God’s goodness while those in places of power, wealth, and influence use God’s name to grind down the poor here and across the face of the earth, while they inflate their own portfolios and live lives of imperial splendor and luxury. As we think about our interns today, I worry whether we as a seminary have sent them out into congregations prepared to engage with the people of their community in these important public issues. My heart goes out to them while they struggle to find the shape of their own witness in those many places.

I did my own internship in Boston in 1965–1966. It was the year of Martin Luther King’s March on Boston. He came because Boston was torn by a huge civil rights battle with respect to its highly segregated public school system. The Rev. Vernon Carter, an African American Lutheran pastor held a “freedom vigil” in front of the Boston School Committee headquarters for weeks, and members of congregations would join him there, marching back and forth and singing “We Shall Overcome.” I joined in those marches and invited members of our congregation to come along. With the pastor out of town the Sunday before Martin Luther King arrived in Boston, I was scheduled to preach. In my sermon I praised King and encouraged the members of our church to join King’s March. Which got me in heaps of trouble with the pastor and his wife. The pastor’s wife came up to me after the service in a rage and declared to me that I was the ruination of their church. “If anyone were to preach that sermon,” she said, “it should have been the pastor!” Well, yes!

I don’t know whether I did the right thing when I preached that sermon. I had no guidelines from anywhere, least of all my seminary. I was winging it. I wonder today about our interns, how they are doing, have we served them well in the preparation we’ve offered at PLTS?

What we could be doing is some serious study of the issues to be certain we know what we are talking about, that we are naming the problem accurately. We could be engaging in serious discussion of what our role is and what our response or responses might be. We could try some playful experiments to test out possible roles. We could imagine various scenarios for congregational involvement. That is, we could do something.

Or we can do nothing, and leave it pretty much to the most jingoistic, bellicose, triumphalist, anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-Gospel Christians to define the public discourse, set the public agenda, and shape our common future. Of course, if we do nothing, God will continue to love us, care for us, support and sustain us. And continue to point us to Jesus the Child, and to the Jesus figures in our lives.

Can I completely give up on Sammy stories even in such a politically focused sermon? Nope. Dear little 3 ½ year old Sammy. He came to our house on Monday, and by mid-afternoon he informed us it was time for ice cream. He wanted all three of us—Sammy and my wife Judy and I—to sit down and eat ice cream together, but unfortunately there was very little left in the box. So Judy said, “Sammy, there isn’t much ice cream left. Why don’t you just have it all?” But Sammy was undeterred. He said, “There’s enough for me and for you and grandpa. You have ice cream too.” So we all had smaller servings, but he was happy. It was enough. He had brought along a little lunch box with some lunch stuff his mommy had made for him. It included two cookies. So he gave one to grandma, ate one himself, and told Judy she should have the other one. “Two cookies—enough for both!”

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Jesus’ Gospel word is to follow him by denying ourselves. And it is a Gospel word. We can deny ourselves because we will not go away empty. We can deny ourselves because we know God won’t. God, in fact, fills our lives with abundance. We don’t need to save our life because our lives are already preserved, sustained, enriched, enlarged by a God who showers us each day with life in all its fullness. We don’t need to seek the whole world because God has given it to us—at least enough of it—already. We can forget ourselves because we have already been given all that we need. What will it profit us to gain the whole next tax cut and forfeit a life that is content with enough for the sake of a life anxiously aimed only at acquiring more and more and more, ceaselessly, endlessly more? God has given us all that we need. When we share the eucharist, it’s a sign and seal—like Sammy’s ice cream and Sammy’s cookie—of the truth that God is a generous God who has given us all we need. That is at the core of our faith. Hold on to that conviction, that faith. Then we can play and plan together to give that faith a joyful public voice in Jesus’ name.