
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

December 24, 2015

When We are Desperate

“I’m in trouble if I don’t preach the gospel.”
1 Corinthians 9:16 (Common English Bible)

John Sutherland Bonnell, that wonderful preacher of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, from 1935 until his retirement in 1962, once shared with that congregation that there is very present among many pastors a crisis of identity. Simply, many pastors have arrived at the conclusion that they could make a greater contribution by going into politics, medicine or some other vocation than ministry. Pastors today have the uneasy feeling that the ministry of Jesus Christ has been relegated to a secondary place in usefulness to the greater good and service of others.

This was my experience one December night fifteen years ago. I served a congregation in Irving, Texas and a dear member of that church was very ill. My visit with her in the Irving Memorial Hospital that evening left me troubled. I held her hand; I read several Psalms of comfort from the Bible and prayed with her. Before leaving her room, I told her that I loved her. I did love her – deeply so. Her weeks in the hospital and my frequent visits had brought us very close to one another. Now it seemed that she would not return home. She was dying. And there was nothing I could do for her. I had the uneasy feeling that I had little to contribute.

My black, leatherbound Bible was clutched tightly in my hand as I stood in an elevator for the ride down to the lobby. Before the doors closed, a doctor stepped onto the elevator with me. He gave me a pleasant smile as he took a place next to me. He stood there in his white jacket, identity badge attached and a stethoscope around his neck. I remember how intensely I wished I could trade my Bible for his stethoscope – I wanted to be useful to my friend. The doors of the elevator closed.

Then the doctor spoke to me. “Are you a pastor?” I felt inadequate as I answered that I was. “Would you pray for me?” he asked. “I am going now to care for someone who is desperately ill. I have given her the best care my training and experience can give, yet she remains very sick. I have neither the strength nor skills to do more. I need Jesus now. She needs Jesus now. Would you pray for me, for her?”

Tonight is Christmas Eve. Tonight the church stands on tiptoe anticipating One who comes to us when our strength is depleted and our skills are inadequate. God comes to us in Jesus precisely because our best politics, our best medicine, aren’t sufficient for our need. The Apostle Paul understood this. Paul’s conception of ministry, says Bonnell, is separate from ours as far as the east is from the west. Paul had a firm grasp of our need. So he preached the gospel.

Doug Hood

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