

A Little Less Certainty and a Lot More Love

Text: II Kings; I Corinthians 13; Luke 9:46-56

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I added the reading from the Hebrew scriptures, because in going to that Gospel passage, I knew that the background was important, that story of Elijah and King Ahaziah, violent, causing us to shudder a bit, of course, but yet representative of that particular day. The issue was that the king did not honor *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, but rather was seeking counsel from one of the Canaanite deities, and of course, the violence was consuming two groups of fifty with fire. That's the background of the story in Luke.

That ninth chapter always surprises me again when I read it - the disciples following Jesus, living with Jesus, imbibing the spirit of Jesus, arguing among themselves which one of them is the greatest, and having a child placed in their midst, with Jesus' words, "The least among you is the greatest." And then John proudly telling Jesus that he caught some evangelist out in the suburbs who set up a tent and was conducting exorcisms, and John told him to stop, and Jesus said to him, "Don't tell him to stop. If he's not against us, he's for us." And then finally Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem, and he's going to go through Samaria. He sends some ahead to make preparations, but the village in Samaria will not receive him because his face is set to Jerusalem, the other rival spiritual center, and so, James and John, who were rightly called the Sons of Thunder, said, "Show us. Call down fire to consume them," and Jesus just shakes his head and looks at them and says, "You don't know what spirit you are of." They go on to another village.

I want to say quickly that the contrast is not between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The contrast is not between Judaism and Christianity. The contrast is between two Jews, Elijah in the 9th century B.C.E., and Jesus, so about 900 years separate them. They are both Jewish and they both live out of the same covenant relationship. It's not a contrast of religions here. It is a contrast of spirit and the different embodiment of, the different understanding of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who Israel was certain is God alone. The issue with Elijah was that there was not an honoring of God alone. With Jesus, it was an issue of love refusing violence, retaliation, vengeance.

It was a couple of months ago when I was setting my preaching for the fall that I came to this particular sermon idea, which I call "A Little Less Certainty and a Lot More Love." The reason I came to it is about that time there was the front-page headline in the *Grand Rapids Press* that the Christian group of churches, the ecumenical center called GRACE, was withdrawing from the interfaith Thanksgiving service. On the front-page, two prominent Christian Reformed pastors of that group were quoted as saying, "Obviously we have given off the wrong signals in our interfaith activity. It might appear that we are worshipping the same God and that's just not true." I was shocked, I was saddened, I was disappointed by that, I was embarrassed by that. I did not think out of the Reformed community in this area that there would be that kind of statement of an exclusivistic spirit because there's a theological issue here, and the theological issue here is that there is only God revealed in Jesus Christ and every other God and every other tradition is the false God, is an idol.

To me, the theological issue is that you cannot have many gods. If you say God, you are saying God alone. Jesus never intended that he was bringing to expression a new God. This was the God of Israel. This was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The whole early Christian movement was a Jewish movement that had no conception of some other God because they had no possibility of another God. God is God. The Apostle Paul remained a Jew all of his life and he certainly never conceived of the fact that he became the apostle of some other God.

There is God. And then there are our respective religious traditions, and in those respective religious traditions, we have a groping, seeking, yearning after that God who is God alone, that infinite mystery who transcends us, who is beyond our definition, who is beyond our ability to define or domesticate. I had thought that possibly we had come to an understanding of the fact that religion is a human imaginative, creative construct. Someone has an epiphany, a vision, tells a story, gathers a community, forms a ritual, gains an identity, and there is a people formed around that identity and in that ritual and observance experiencing that transcendent God who is beyond all of our naming and all of our defining. I had really thought that maybe we had gotten to that point, but obviously, we have not.

I want to be very clear - in no way is my Christian faith denigrated by the recognition that God's grace and God's revealing is also accessible to those other traditions. It does not take away from mine at all. I can simply recognize that I am born into, nurtured in a community that has an identity, that has a ritual and an observance, a story that becomes a medium for the experience of God, but that that is also the case for those other great traditions in which the children of God experience that touch of transcendence, that Infinite One whose presence becomes tangible in the finite, religious expressions of humankind. And so, because that exclusive spirit is so often marked by a dogmatic certainty, the title of my message is "A Little Less Certainty and a Lot More Love."

Near the end of his narration of the tragic history of 2000 years of the Church's relationship to the Jewish people, James Carroll in *Constantine's Sword*, which some of us have been working through this fall, suggests that truth is not the possession of any institution, any institutional grouping, but rather, that truth is the gift of the Holy Spirit to the people of God, and he concludes that fine paragraph with a statement that says,

"Finally, the revelation of Jesus is not about knowing, but about loving."

He refers to I Corinthians 13, for that is precisely what Paul was saying. In a fractured congregation that was filled with all kinds of arrogant claims as to the superiority of my gift over your gift, Paul says we need all the gifts because we are a body, but let me show you a better way, and then he pens that magnificent hymn to love, and it is based on the fact that our knowledge is in part. To be human is to have only relative, partial, provisional knowledge. It is the very nature of being human. Paul says, "We see in a mirror dimly. When I was a child, I thought as a child. When I became an adult, I put away childish things." Right now, he is saying, "Human family, Corinthian congregation, we are in the childhood of our human experience. That will change some day when we see face to face. But, as for now, because our knowledge is limited, humility becomes us." A little less certainty and a lot more love, because all knowledge will pass away and be superseded, but love is ultimate.

Love can be a "mushy" kind of a word. But to love calls for tangible expression, and I would suggest that in our society today and in the Church today there is an issue that is tearing people apart, an issue that has become a scapegoat issue in society. It is the issue of sexual orientation. In the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling this past week, it has sent Right Wing forces scurrying to try to get state amendments to constitutions defining marriage as between a man and a woman, when the constitution already assumes that and takes that for granted. But, this is an end run trying to stave off the possibility that what the Massachusetts Supreme Court said is a right, a human civil right, a same-sex union, could be authenticated in society. Yesterday's *New York Times* had an Op-Ed piece that spoke eloquently and powerfully about marriage and about the crisis in which marriage finds itself because of the lack of devotion and commitment, the contingent nature of marriage where, if it isn't working out, we just forget it. David Brooks, a Conservative voice, writes,

Still even in this time of crisis, every human being in the United States has the chance to move from the path of contingency to the path of marital fidelity, except homosexuals. Gays and lesbians are banned from marriage and forbidden to enter into this powerful and ennobling institution. A gay or lesbian couple may love each other as deeply as any two people, but when you meet a member of such a couple at a party or he or she then introduces you to "a partner," a word that reeks of contingency, you would think that faced with this marriage crisis we Conservatives would do

everything in our power to move as many people as possible from the path of contingency to the path of fidelity, but instead, many argue that gays must be banished from matrimony because gay marriage would weaken all marriage. A marriage is between a man and a woman, they say. It is a woman who domesticates men and makes marriage work. Well, if women really domesticated men, heterosexual marriage wouldn't be in crisis. In truth, it's moral commitment renewed every day through faithfulness that domesticates all people. The Conservative course is not to banish gay people from making such commitments. It is to expect that they make such commitments. We shouldn't just allow gay marriage, we should insist on gay marriage. We should regard as scandalous that two people could claim to love each other and not want to sanctify their love with marriage and fidelity.

In the Episcopal Church, the consecration of a gay man in a committed relationship to the office of bishop is tearing that church apart. And a very clever journalist, Garry Wills, in *Newsweek* a couple of weeks ago, titles his column, "The Limits of Inclusiveness," and he maintains that in the American Episcopal Church, opening up the office of the Bishop to a gay man in a committed relationship has broken the bounds by which the Church can finally stay together. That's just too much inclusion.

And he denigrates Bishop Spong who, in explaining why the Episcopal Church, Anglican Church worldwide, is so divided on this is because, in Africa and Asia and Latin America, [there is] a very conservative element of the Church [who have not moved beyond] superstitious Christianity. For the American Episcopal Church to have an insight and a conviction about what is morally right and decent and dignified, [but] to wait for the rest of the Church to catch up would be to violate their own conscience and their own truth before God.

Wills suggests that the argument that the various provinces of the Anglican Church be allowed to determine themselves is like at the time of the Civil War when there was an argument that the states should be allowed to determine whether or not they had slaves, and he wants to suggest that that kind of determination by the states would have been just too much inclusion, that rather Lincoln said there are some things that are right and we must stand there.

I want to turn that argument right against Wills and say that is precisely what is going on here. In the case of slavery, Lincoln was saying slavery is contrary to the very essence of this country, to this experiment in freedom. And I want to say to him the inclusion of the Episcopal Church is not too inclusive. If it is, then let the community be shattered and broken until there be enough light from God's word that will allow others to come along and to see that we need a lot less certainty and a lot more love. We cannot as a community simply mouth love. There are times that we must stand up for what is good and dignified and decent and moral, and before the face of God for us true, to stand up and to be counted.

No one has ever seen God. John writes, *“God is love. No one has ever seen God. But the one who dwells in love, dwells in God, and God dwells in that one.”* Dear friends, I know I’m preaching to the choir, thank God. But, we need a little less certainty and a lot more love.