

The Heart Cannot Rest Where the Mind Cannot Follow

From the series: Moving On To Maturity

Text: Isaiah 44:18; Ephesians 4:13; Matthew 5:48

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

As the children leave the sanctuary, the words of the old Spiritual come to me, "Give me that old time religion; give me that old time religion; it was good enough for my mother; it was good enough for my sister; it was good enough for my brother, and it's good enough for me."

Well, we've all sung it and I think we can understand and feel some of the emotion that is behind that old Spiritual, but I will say this morning quite clearly and straightforwardly that the old time religion isn't good enough for me. It's not really that it's not good enough for me; it's just simply that it no longer works for me. The old time religion can no longer resonate with my knowledge and my human experience, that manner in which it sought to express the reality of the living God and the embrace of God, of the cosmic reality of which we are a part. It no longer tracks with what I understand about myself, about the world, about history, about God. And so, the old time religion comes up short in my experience and I want to speak about that this morning as I begin a new series of messages on "Moving On to Maturity." Moving on to maturity, or growing up as people of faith.

I have experienced a freedom to address these issues in the last year and a half, which is a freedom that I didn't know that I didn't have before. When people ask me, "How are you doing," I say, "Just great," and they say, "Really, how are you doing?" And if they really want to know, then I use the phrase which many of you have heard me say, "I have a freedom that I didn't know I didn't have." That's quite a remarkable experience, because I had always felt free in my thinking and in my preaching, and you as a congregation had always encouraged and affirmed that freedom to probe and to wrestle and to question and to wonder. But I now recognize, in retrospect, that I was not totally free because I was always trying to express my best understanding and insights within a certain box, within a certain confessional home. There were certain parameters against which I was always testing my struggle to understand, and, of course, that's not all bad. In fact, such freedom as I have now in this independent status in which we find ourselves has perils that go along with it. There is a real danger in the non-accountability of my

present situation. I am aware of that and you need to be aware of that, too. There is the voice of an old professor always ringing in my mind who used to say, "Beware of the perils of independency." I have always affirmed the importance of ecclesiastical connection, but I must say to you, for the time being at least, I am savoring the freedom and enjoying it very much.

I got a visit from my computer son from Florida who got me the computer against any indication that I would ever be able to use it. It has sat moribund on my desk for a couple of years. But, since he was just here, once again he forced me to learn how to read my mail and, thinking that perhaps having just learned it anew, I probably ought to practice it a couple of times, last night in order to avoid working on the sermon, I punched the computer on and I read my mail, and I had this long letter from Pilgrim out east in Maine, a Congregational minister who said that you are a marvelous community of people, and he said, "For a year and a half now I've been taking your sermons off the Internet and while I don't agree with everything, they're always stimulating and provocative," and he went on to affirm us and then he went on to say, "And why I am now contacting you is that we were a congregation who forty years ago as a Congregational Church didn't go into the union with the Reformed, German Reformed Church to form the United Church of Christ." And he says the Congregational churches that didn't go into that merger formed an alliance called the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, and he said, "From what I sense on the Internet about Christ Community, it's a place where you could feel at home. It has great diversity of theological opinion, and the reason we didn't go into the merger was because we value congregational autonomy."

Well, it's a very nice letter and I will respond to him. I will say to him, "Thank you very much, and it sounds as though you have the best offer going. But now, in the springtime of my senility, sliding toward summer, I am having the time of my life, and I have no right to determine the future of this congregation forever, but just for a little while I want to be free."

Now, that's a kind of freedom that I didn't know that I didn't have, and I acknowledge its perils and its dangers because a person in my position can lead a people astray, can abuse, can exploit, and without a system of accountability, where might one go? The only thing that causes me not to worry too much about this congregation is the fact that nobody's going to lead you blindfolded anywhere. I wish you could all know all the stories of the people that joined this faith community today. You are people who are here very intentionally and very deliberately precisely because you want to think and wrestle and struggle and come to your own religious experience, your own Christian experience, and you have thrown off that mantle of authoritarianism that has marked the Church traditionally. You, I believe, are mature and maturing people, and I think it's time for us to move on to maturity altogether, and in doing that very deliberately and very self-consciously, moving on.

The title of this first sermon in the series indicates what I want to say and that is that the heart cannot rest where the mind cannot follow. The heart in terms of the whole being, our whole being, our intuitive sense of what is and what is true and what is real - that heart cannot dwell or rest where the mind cannot follow. I put the title in quite a long time ago and I was remembering the statement that I read in a book a lot longer time ago and I thought I was quoting the statement correctly. Last night I pulled the old book off the shelf and paged through to see if I could find that statement again. I found it and I found out I had misquoted it. The statement really is, "The heart cannot finally find true what the mind finds false." That's a better statement; that's sharper and that says precisely what I want to say to you this morning as we think about moving on to maturity. The heart, the being, our total being cannot finally find true what our minds find false. And that's the problem with religion. It's the problem of the Church. It's the problem of every religious institution and every world religion. It is endemic to the religious experience, that tension between what the heart finds true and what the mind knows.

The mind deals with the stuff of everyday reality and there has been an explosion of knowledge and a cumulative human learning by this time in the cosmic journey. It is just fantastic and it continues to float all over the place. And the mind takes all that in, but then, also plays it off against the faith structure, the creedal condition, the confessional statements, and there is conflict. And what I want to say to you this morning as an expression of the freedom that I am sensing is that I delight to address these things, not in some manner in which I would imply that I have grasped all the facets of truth or that I sort of have a handle on this thing, but this morning I want to say to you that I will never preach to you what my heart cannot finally find true. And my heart will not be able, finally, to find true what my mind finds false.

Now, it's taken me 39 years to say that. All of the past time trying always to translate that Gospel message within certain parameters and then suddenly to come to this giddy experience of saying, "What do I really believe?" and daring to share it, hoping to encourage you, maybe even inspire you, stimulate you, to be provocative in your own experience, but not as an authority. Ah, you say, "You're an authority figure and you can't get away from it." I refuse the office. I'm a pilgrim with you. I will not be your authority. I'm going to think with you; I'm going to share with you the best insights I have, but you can listen and you can filter and I hope that you will be stimulated in your own pilgrimage to move from secondhand religion to firsthand experience.

That's the problem with religion, of course. It begins with an explosion, with a fire. Someone has a vision. God knocks someone off their horse, prostrate on the ground, a burning bush, whatever it may be. A word made flesh, and that explosion, that fire, that flame engulfs and sweeps, but eventually the initial fire begins to dampen, to be banked, to die down, and then those who have been caught in the explosion begin to wonder what in the world happened, and the

experience, then, begins to be distilled for certain truths that can be stated rationally, reasonably. So now, we have an experience that cannot really be communicated, but, having to be communicated, having to be told, shared, and so we do the best we can to distill what we can from the explosion and say this and that and so forth. There is a real tension in the beginning, differing opinions, alternative systems. There's a conflict going on, but eventually, some party or some person gets the upper hand and the truth is defined. That's what we call orthodoxy.

You know what orthodoxy is. Well, you know what orthodontists do? They straighten your teeth. You know what orthopedic surgeons do? They realign a cracked bone. You know what an orthodox preacher does? He keeps you thinking right. Ortho - straight or correct. Doxa - from dokein, to think. The orthodox church is a church in which people are nurtured, trained, schooled and controlled to think right. Orthodoxy has the truth defined rationally. This explosion, this experience that burst forth gets domesticated to a creedal statement, a confessional statement, and there is a right way to believe or to think. That is orthodoxy, and it is the inevitable movement of every religious movement. It is the necessity of every institutionalization of a religious movement and, to the extent that the distilled truth of the experience is clear and concise, to that extent it can be passed along and it will be successful and it will build a community of people, followers, and it will be a means for many for the stimulus of fresh experience. But, it will be the case with many, many more that it will simply be the second-hand creed that one received, that one inherited that was passed along to one and which one passes along.

The problem with orthodoxy is the problem with secondhand religious experience that shuts off the possibility of continuing thought and growth and new adventure. Oh, there have been instances of movement. For example, the Genesis stories. If you have an Old King James Bible around, look in the column between the columns and you will see there 4004 B.C.. Bishop Usher, an English Bishop, went back and added up all the years of all the genealogies and he concluded that creation had to be 4004 B.C. And it was really a matter of creedal conviction for generations, and when Darwin came along in the 19th century and the whole evolutionary hypothesis was set forth, there was this intense struggle between science and religion. In fact, orthodoxy has had a tremendous problem in the whole modern period in the last four to five hundred years because orthodoxy is a rational statement of what is. It's no longer simply the experience, the fire, that which is deeper than the rational. It is a rational statement of what is. Now you have the whole advent of the natural sciences whose principle of verification is able to determine what is, empirically through experimentation. Religion and science have been in conflict and science will win every time as long as you are dealing on the rational basis, as long as you are dealing on propositional truths, claiming what is, what is reality, what is the human person, what has happened in history, etc., etc.

The Church has made some progress because we have come to see the symbolic nature of those Genesis creation stories, and the roof hasn't caved in. Yet, here in 1999, there's a whole fundamentalist Christian movement that would have Creationism taught in the public schools. It seems impossible that that discussion could still be going on, but it is.

In terms of the apocalypticism of the New Testament in several of its expressions, expecting the soon return of Jesus Christ - well, we've had to make adjustments to that because nothing has happened. But, here we are on the threshold of the third millennium and there are those who are still talking about the second coming of Christ in terms of this millennial turn. So, we are able to continue, to perpetuate anachronistic understandings and outmoded manners of faith to a remarkable degree in a world that is as open as ours where there is as much information around.

This has been the ongoing problem of the orthodox Church, the orthodox expression of any religion. Correct thinking. But the world doesn't stop; history doesn't stop; human experience continues to go on and there is an accumulation of knowledge and experience, which finally has to shatter that little box of faith that has been given to us. And when that happens, one either leaves and drops out, and that's happened en masse, or one shuts off the mind, or one says, as I am saying to you this morning, my heart cannot dwell and affirm as true that which my mind finds to be false. But, if my experience, if the reality to which my whole being is drawn, in which it is grounded, embraced, if that total experience transcends my rational understanding, then I have to try to find a new way to say reasonably, understandably what that deeper experience is.

That's my hope for all of us - that we will move on to maturity, that we will come to a deeper expression of our faith in order that we need not jettison that deep religious experience of the grace of God, nor live with our heads in the sand, failing to acknowledge that the old paradigms and stories are simply shot out of the water with everything that is coming to light in what we know about our world, about our history, about our person. Maturity, moving on with fresh experience and fresh faith expression - that's the goal.

There is precedent for doing this. Jesus said, "It has been said, but I say unto you ...," and he called the people in the culminating point to that portion of the Sermon on the Mount where he calls for the loving even of enemies, saying, "Be ye therefore perfect..." a terrible translation filled with all the moralism that has been oppressive throughout all the centuries, "Be ye therefore perfect, as God is perfect?" No, that's not it. *Telios* is the Greek word. Be therefore mature, be ye therefore complete, as God is mature. Jesus is talking about a new being - a kingdom person in that Sermon on the Mount. He comes to this culminating point and says, "Be inclusive, not exclusive. No more tribalism, no more drawing circles around my little people, no more over-againstness, no more 'us and them.' For God's sake, love your enemies, as God loves all, for the rain falls on the just

and the unjust and the sun shines on the good and the evil because there are no good and evil, just and unjust, but all human beings in various states of disarray who are embraced by the eternal God who created us." Jesus says love your enemies, embrace, be inclusive.

Paul uses the same word, *Telios*. Jesus says be like God, be complete, be mature. Paul says in the 13th verse of Ephesians 4, "Come to maturity." Grow up. No more children blown about by every wind of doctrine. Grow up! Think! Because the passion of Paul, the vision of Paul came to expression in that third chapter, the 14th verse following where he says, "I pray for you that you be rooted and grounded in love, that you'll come to know the length and the breadth and the height and the depth of the love of God, that you will come to know all the fullness of God. That's what I want for you." He recognizes that it is a process, but he says, "Move on to maturity; be mature in Christ Jesus."

I don't know, but I wonder how long – even with the institutional structures and the momentum that they create and the power they possess and the control they have over many – many people can go on. Can the heart find truth where the mind finds falsehood? Do we not have to enter this world of ours and open our eyes and take it all in and then know that, beneath it all, above it all, and beyond it all is the eternal God whose grace is an experience of the heart far beyond a set of rational propositions?

If I were to put it in sum this morning, I would say, on the basis of what Jesus says, and what Paul says in our text – "Be open-minded." "It has been said, I say to you ..." – to make that transition you have to have an open mind. Don't tell me it was Jesus, the son of God and therefore, it doesn't apply to the rest of us. Jesus, with all of the limitations of his humanity, had the courage to give expression to something new. "It has been said, I say unto you ..." Be of broad and liberal spirit, embrace, do not exclude, love your enemies, be done with tight tribalism, narrow ethnicism, destructive nationalism. Stop drawing lines unless the circle embraces the whole human family. And, trust deeply. Trust deeply. Let it wash through your mind and over your heart that you are rooted and grounded in love, that love is the ultimate reality.

The French thinker, Pascal, said it better than I can say it. "If one subjects everything to reason, our religion will lose its mystery. If one offends the principles of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous. There are two equally dangerous extremes - to shut reason out and to let nothing else in."

Let us go on to maturity. No more studied ambiguity; no more word games; just plain-speaking, because the deepest truth of this place, for better or for worse, because it is the deepest truth of this preacher is that the heart cannot finally find true what the mind finds false.