

Carrying Coals to Newcastle

Scripture: Luke 9:51-56; 19:41-48

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is a pleasure and high privilege to be with you this morning. I am grateful to Bruce for his kind orientation and bringing me to this point. It is a privilege to stand here, and I do so with some fear and trembling, in spite of the fact that it is nearly forty years since my ordination and I have preached a sermon or two in those years. But this is not just any place, this is an historic pulpit and you are a people with a grand tradition. This is hardly a place where one would mouth banalities or come forth with trivial truisms. I come with some fear and trembling, not because I do not know that you are a gracious people and this a gracious place; you have been supportive and encouraging to me and to my people, and for that I would thank you very much.

But, I do come with some fear and trembling, for this is always a very serious moment in which one would seek some word to address to a people engaged in the religious quest. I come carrying coals to Newcastle.

Perhaps I should explain that a bit. There is, as some of you may know, a conversation that takes place on Tuesdays at Duba's bar. A few weeks ago when I was wrestling with this moment, I said to an old intimate friend of mine, John Richard DeWitt, "If you were to preach at Fountain, what would you preach?" He laughed at the prospect. John Richard DeWitt is a classmate of mine from college and seminary and some few years ago he was called to become the pastor of the Seventh Reformed Church of Grand Rapids. At that time, I was serving my present congregation in Spring Lake and we were still affiliated with the Reformed Church in America and we had the distinction of being on the far left; he in Seventh Reformed Church had the distinction of being on the far right. The polls have been shaved a bit because both of us have been cut out by now.

The reason that John Richard DeWitt sits at the table in Duba's is because an older luncheon fellowship between Dr. Duncan Littlefair and Dr. Lester DeKoster had been going on for many years. And when my friend came to this city, the DeKosters became members of that congregation. Lester invited his pastor to the table. (Now, you see, Duncan was at the disadvantage. It was heavily weighted toward orthodoxy. But then my old friend invited me to the table. The scales were

righted once again, although I had the sense that Duncan was doing quite well on his own.) But, that wonderful conversation at Duba's was an occasion for me to say to my friend, "What would you preach?" I said to the table, "The only thing I can think of as a theme is 'Carrying Coals to Newcastle;' what do I have to bring to that people from whom I have learned so much, a people with whom I will spend the rest of my ministry trying to keep up?"

Then my old friend, John Richard DeWitt, said, "Well, you know even Newcastle needs coals that are flaming." In that moment, of course, the sermon was born. Contrary to nature, the birth pains came afterward and have continued to the present.

But, Coals to Newcastle - I, a guest in this pulpit, seeking to say something to you, a people engaged in the religious quest along with myself. I want to say very clearly in the beginning that I am conscious that I am bringing coals to Newcastle, for you have been a people for a long time on this quest. You have been a people for a long time who have been a voice in this community; you have been on the cutting edge, you have been prophetic and provocative. Thus, as I come and would say all of the things that are the passion of my life and ministry, I would only be repeating the things that have moved you and motivated you over many decades.

I want you to know that I am conscious of that and that you have been for me and for many others a beacon. You have been a model of what a congregation ought to be, placed in the city as you are; I want to thank you for what you have been and express very clearly my respect for all that you are.

I can perhaps demonstrate what I mean by that when I tell you a personal narrative that goes back forty years. In the irony of history and our human experience, it was forty years ago when my friend, John Richard DeWitt and I were students at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. We were a part of a quartet that might have been called The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. We probably should have been caged up at the time, but, nonetheless, we were free to flaunt our impeccable orthodoxy. At that time my friend, John Richard, invited Dr. Duncan Littlefair to address the student assembly one evening during the year. Well, he came, and he was the adversary, he was the enemy we allowed within the camp. He was fascinating, brilliant as always, and terribly threatening. But, I was quite sure that I had managed to escape the evening without damage; I was invulnerable at those times. I had many answers, not having yet confronted the questions.

It was shortly after I returned to Spring Lake in the early seventies that I was invited to be the speaker at an insurance seminar. I was some kind of a visiting fireman. I don't know why I agreed to do it, but I told them everything I knew, and some things I only suspected. During one of the coffee breaks, my wife, Nancy, came up to me with a bit of a smile on her face with a distinguished-looking gentleman, and she said to me, "This gentleman has just paid you a

compliment, I think." I said, "Oh, what was that?" And he said, "Well, I told your wife that any day you could step into the pulpit of Fountain Street Church."

Sometime after that, I think still in the seventies, Nancy and I came and worshiped with you. I remember the day vividly. Dr. Duncan Littlefair was in this pulpit. The title of the sermon was "Honk If You Love Jesus." The text was Matthew 11:28, "Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." And Dr. Littlefair proceeded with all of his brilliance to contradict the text. He said, "There is no one out there, you are on your own." He decried the weakness of so much sick religion. Well, it was a bit unsettling to me, I must admit. But, then, before we left the service, the choir intoned those words, "The Lord bless you ..." and I thought, "Oh well, it's all right."

But then, after some years, I was invited to be a Professor of Preaching at Western Theological Seminary and I wrote an article about the extent of God's grace, wondering out loud and in print whether or not the embrace of God's grace might not embrace the whole human race. I found that I wasn't simply the pastor of Christ Community Church, but I was now a seminary professor and seminary professors don't think out loud, let alone dare to utter such a truth. I stepped aside rather than bringing down the roof, but as I left the seminary and returned to my home base, I said to my leadership and to my team members, "I must not be less radical; I must be more radical."

I said to a trusted colleague of mine, "Christ Community must move toward Fountain Street," and he said to me, "You're in enough trouble, don't say that publically." But, I knew it, you see, I knew it ten years ago and I have watched you and I have admired you, I have respected you and I have learned much from you. I say this to you, not simply to tell you my personal narrative, but to remind you that you are being watched and you never know who is watching and you never know the impact of the integrity of your life and what it will mean to those who with you are on the religious quest.

So, I carry coals to Newcastle quite self-consciously and I do it in order to remind you that what you are and what you have been is critically important. The world needs you, this community needs you, the whole church needs you. But, I say those things to you not simply that you might relax and rest on your laurels. Let me read a statement from Martin Luther:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. *Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved.* To be steady on all battle fronts besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.

Luther would indicate that we may be doing well all across the board, but if we have not located that one point where the battle is raging, where the fire is raging,

we will not be faithful; rather, we will be a disgrace. It is not enough once to have a vision. It is not enough to have been relevant and pertinent and powerful in the past, for it is always now and it's always today in which we must discover that point at which the battle is raging, those things to which we must address ourselves if we would be true to our vision and faithful to our dreams.

Where is the battle raging today? Well, I don't really need to tell you. You can read it every day in your newspaper and view it on the television news. Jerusalem, the holy city, the cradle of three great religious traditions, where even this week violence, terrorism and death reign. Where people who profess to worship the same God are at the respective extremes, killing each other; where the fundamentalisms of Judaism and Islam clash.

Where does the battle rage? It rages in Wyoming where a young man is strung across a fence as a sign post and a marker of that paranoia, fear and hatred that would say, "This is what we have in store for you if you are gay or lesbian."

Where does it rage? It rages just down the road at my alma mater, Hope College, where the chaplaincy office advocates a position that condemns a positive response to the pluralism of religion, the recognition of the value of the respective traditions. At my old alma mater, exclusivism is being promoted in its sharpest form.

Those are but symptoms, you see, for underneath, and this is my point, underneath, the greatest peril to the world, to its peace and its well-being are the respective religious fundamentalisms that are fueling the fears of people and unleashing their animal nature that result in the terrorism and the violence and the death that mark our globe every moment of every day.

Where is the battle raging? It is raging in a kind of absolutist and dogmatic religion that is blind to its own meanness and narrowness, that identifies itself, its sacred book, its sacred tradition, its sacred persons with the Absolute itself, that has no sense that it is but a human response to that ultimate Mystery that pervades our lives and embraces us in a grace, and that sees its mission to promote its own particular point of view, no matter what the cost.

I believe that's where the battle rages today and I am again bringing coals to Newcastle because you've heard it from this pulpit for decades. But religion has never been more powerful; it has never been more volatile; it has never been more dangerous than it is in our day. And so, while I realize I am carrying coals to Newcastle, I would say to you, "What do we do about it?"

We might abandon religion, wash our hands of it, shake the dust from our sandals. I'd like to do that. I cannot believe in the bigotry and the bias and the prejudice and the fueling of violence for which religion is responsible. There are times when I am so ashamed of it, I would like to leave it altogether, and I imagine you have been there, too.

Or, we might not abandon it. We might remain in it, but only in our little enclave, congratulating ourselves that we have long since left such darkness and with a kind of enlightened superiority look with disdain on those whose religious passion is misdirected. Or, we might see it as simply another social relationship, lacking all passion and significance.

But, how can we? In this city where you have set such a grand tradition, the dangerous religious exclusivism to which I have referred is being preached in the majority of the pulpits at this very hour. The enlightenment that you have enjoyed over the decades has not penetrated one whit. There is still an exclusivism and a dogmatism and an absolutism which has put the whole creation in danger and is a detriment to human well-being.

Well, what will we do about it? We won't go on a social crusade. We won't gird up our loins and march off to battle. We had better wait first, in moments like this, in an environment like this, in the attitude of prayer, allowing the Spirit to seep deeply into our being. We must *be* something before we do something.

Let me hold up before you the model of Jesus who set his face to go to Jerusalem. It was precisely his recognition that the collusion of religion and politics was an oppression to the people that set him on his course. He set his face to Jerusalem. On the way, they went through Samaria. There was hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans and the Samaritans wouldn't receive him. His own disciples said, "Should we call down fire from heaven and consume them?" And he said, "My God, you don't know what spirit you're of, for I have come to heal humanity, not destroy it."

And then he came to the city and as he looked at that golden city from the crest of Olivet, he began to weep. It was anguish, anguish wet with tears. He cried out that great lament, "If you ... had only recognized ... the things that make for peace, but now they are hidden from your eyes." He could see it; he knew it. With frustration, with anger, with compassion, he entered the city and the very citadel of religion and he cleansed the temple of its bartering and its business and called it again to be what it was intended to be - a house of prayer for all people.

This is why I follow the way of Jesus - not because he is some Divine Intruder invading our time and space to effect some miracle cure for our frail and flawed humanity, promising us some bliss in another world at a future time, not because he is some Savior figure of a Salvation cult. No, rather, that in that life, in that face set steadfastly toward Jerusalem, in those tears shed over that Holy City, I see the loving anguish, the passionate concern that bespeaks one who cares deeply, one who is angry with human arrogance and gracious with human weakness. I see his intolerance of human systems of domination and oppression, religious, political, economic and social. I see his awareness that it is religion gone awry that nurtures prejudice and fosters ignorance, that hides injustice in a cloak of piety while exploiting human fears and weakness to support institutionalized religion which so subtly becomes a facade behind which to hide

vested interests and reactionary forces seeking to maintain the status quo which means a societal system protecting privilege, deaf to the cry of the millions who live a less than human existence.

I set before you Jesus, with all of his compassion for human weakness, in all of his anger at human dominance and oppression. I set before you one who set his face to go to Jerusalem and confronted the principalities and powers, the demons of his day. He found where the battle was raging and, after steeping himself in the presence of God, set forth to act.

That is the fiery coal I would bring to Newcastle. I have no quick fix, I have no easy answer, but I'll tell you this - a comfortable and complacent liberal religious experience will stand by while the world goes to hell and by God, we can't let it happen!

I set before you a model whose way to follow and in whose steps to walk will bring us to that point where the battle is raging.

May the Spirit give you restlessness in your rest; enough humor to keep you humble, enough grace to keep you going, and joy in your journey.