

Jesus Calling -- January 26, 2014

- First Reading: 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18 Gospel Lesson: Matthew 4: 12-23

Last week, during my installation, I was asked several questions by Mary Gillespie, questions that are asked of everyone who is installed as an elder or deacon in the Presbyterian Church. One of them was,

Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?

Now I have no problem saying "I do" to that question, but I have to admit that I am sometimes frustrated by the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, more by what they don't say than what they do. For example, the Bible tells a lot about WHAT God has people do, but there is very little about WHY God wants us to do a lot of things.

But when it comes to the New Testaments, I think my biggest problem is that we only get the story of the First Generation of Christians. That, I believe, has caused more problems in Christendom than almost any other thing. Why is that an issue?

Well, in the Bible, every one who joins the church is either a) Jewish, and making a major change in the way they worship God, or b) a pagan, who is making a major change in the way they worship God, and in the god they are now going to worship. We get the story of how Cornelius becomes the very first gentile Christian, but we don't get the story of what happened when Cornelius's grandchildren joined the church.

Everyone who gets baptized in the New Testament, is baptized, as an adult, when they join a church, but is because they are all converts to Christianity. So today we get arguments among churches over whether or not we should baptize infants, like we do in the Presbyterian Church, or whether we should wait until a person can make up their own minds, like in the Baptist church.

Paul could not have envisioned a situation where a person could leave the doors of one church, and walk to another church which was only a few blocks away. Every church he served or wrote to was a church he had founded, and he was the only person in that town founding churches.

Because of this we have different ways of interpreting what the Bible means for us today, and different traditions, and different emphasizes in the church today. Some churches read the New Testament situation, and since the New Testament stresses conversion, they stress conversions. I once got into a discussion with a Baptist who told that the point of every worship service was to make converts, and there should be an altar call in every worship service. He thought we Presbyterians were "less than Christian" because we rarely have altar calls. I told him that most people in a Presbyterian Church had been Christians since they were a young age, and if we aimed our worship at people who were not Christians, we would be ignoring the overwhelming majority of people in our pews who were.

Over time in America we developed a rift between churches that emphasized conversion, and churches that emphasized spiritual growth.

You go further back in the history of the church, and you see that when different people started emphasizing different things, The emphasize soon turned into a separate denomination. Martin Luther started emphasizing the experience of Grace, and that became the Protestant Church. Calvin started emphasizing the role of elders and church order, and that became the Presbyterian Church. John Wesley started emphasizing a personal interaction between a person and Jesus, and that became the Methodist Church. Ye others started realizing that not everyone who went to church was actually touched by anything that happened there, or that some had fallen away from church, or had not even been a part of a church, and the Baptist tradition was born.

Now that is a pretty simple breakdown of church history, but it shows how we came to be so divided over the years.

Now I started with sermon by talking about some of my frustrations with the Bible. In this mornings first lesson we see first hand one of the reasons why I find the Scriptures to be so helpful, and that is because people are people, and the problems we have now are often the same problems they had back then. So for example, today I am talking about how the church splits itself into various parts. Listen to what Paul wrote again:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided?

Apparently they had different versions of denominations back then as well, even within the walls of one congregation. In the Corinthian church, after Paul started it, a group of people from the church in Jerusalem visited it, and they represented Peter and his teachings. A man names Apollos also went around as Paul did, and taught in various churches.

And so the people in the Corinthian church gravitated toward one or the other of these teachers. So people were running around saying, "I was converted and taught by Paul."

"Peter was my teacher."

"Oh, everything I know about the faith, I learned from Apollos."

And then you had the super-spiritual folks, who tried one up everyone by saying, "Oh, I only follow the teachings of Jesus."

We see this played out today. I am a Presbyterian, I am a Methodist, I am a Baptist. Oh, I don't have anything to do with denominations, I am non-denominational." Oh, that denomination, the one that does not believe in denominations.

There was a time in this country when your denominational affiliation might be a source of pride. I remember the line in the movie A River Runs Through It, where one character, a Presbyterian says that a Methodist was just a Baptist who had learned to read.

But today, what I am seeing, is that we are doing this out of survival. The Presbyterian denomination is shrinking, as is the Methodist denomination, Lutheran, Episcopalian—even the Southern Baptists are losing members faster than they are replacing them. And sometimes when we feel threatened we do things that feel right, but that are exactly the wrong thing to do.

We go into survival mode. We start caring more about the survival of our particular part of the Kingdom of God than we do about the Kingdom of God. So as the Presbyterian Church shrinks, we start protecting what it means to be a Presbyterian. And that usually means we start fighting about what it means to be a Presbyterian. And when that happens, we have churches who leave the denomination, and churches who get angry with churches who leave the denomination. And we just get smaller, and sometimes as we get smaller, we get bitter. We see those who are doing well, or at least who seem to be, and we get jealous.

Individual churches, as they start to shrink, they go into survival mode. When they do that, they tend to do two very dangerous things. First, they start letting money determine ministry, and two they start to see more of what they cannot do than what they can do. These are very normal things to do, but they are also very dangerous.

One thing I learned in college when I was dating was that if you started talking about the relationships more than enjoying the relationship, the relationship was usually in trouble. When the church starts talking about “What it means to be a Presbyterian, or even a Christian” in our society, that usually means we are in trouble. I read an essay a few years ago on what unhappy people do that makes them more unhappy, and one of the worst things they do is that they start thinking about how they can be happy. Because, you see, when are thinking about how to be happy, you are really thinking about all the reasons why you are unhappy, and when you are focusing on why you are unhappy, you are never going to do the kinds of things you need to do to BE happy.

The same is true of revitalizing a church. We can focus on all the things that are wrong, and heaven knows, if you look at the state of the Presbyterian Church today, there are a lot of reasons to be really depressed. WE can focus on all the ways we are limited by a lack of money, a lack of people power, a lack of resources, a lack of young people. But that will paralyze us. We can circle the wagons, and protect ourselves from people who are different from us, who seem to be attacking us. But the fact is, the church is not being attacked today, it is just being ignored, and circling our wagons and fighting about who is and isn't the best kind of Presbyterian or who is or isn't the right kind of Christian makes us just look silly.

So what do we do? And that brings me to the Gospel Lesson.

¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.”

That actually comes from Isaiah, and Matthew quotes it as he starts to tell us about the life and ministry of Jesus.

¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,

The interesting thing about darkness, is that it always seems endless. The end of a dark route might be several feet or several miles away. Imagine you are in a dark cave, and you don't know how big the cave is. The darkness can make it seem like it goes on forever, even if the end is right before your face.

But when you shine a light, you can see the journey.

During World War II, people in occupied countries lived in very dark times. It looked like no could stop the Nazis. And if they had a radio, they listened every evening for four words. This is London Calling. When they heard those words, they knew that London was still free. The Nazis had not taken them over. And as long as London was free, there was hope for them. Those words were light in the darkness.

In this morning's Gospel text, we hear Jesus calling. We live in an occupied country. We are occupied by hopelessness. Our political system seems to have broken down. Our children are being shot in schools and universities, and at malls, and we are helpless to do anything to stop it. The economy is better, but it still ain't great, and it does not look like it will be great anytime soon.

In the church, we are losing Presbyterians hand over fist. Every year the pool of Christians in this country gets smaller and smaller. And for mainstream churches like us, it is a very small pool. And we could focus on that. We could have us a little pity party.

But the light has come.

Repent, Jesus says, for the Kingdom of Heaven is drawing near.

That is not some guy standing on the street corner with a sign, warning of gloom and doom. Too often we think of that as a warning; we have to change our ways because judgment is well nigh. Sometimes that makes us feel, well like a kid whose parents were out of town, and he had a party at his house, and it is a mess, so he has to repent, clean up the mess, because mom and dad are coming home at four, and with them comes judgment!

But that is not what that means. Repent does mean to change. But we change because the light is here.

We change because we don't have live in the darkness. We can live in the light. The light might show us things about ourselves we would rather not see. That is the repent part. Ruth Graham, Billy Graham's wife told about the first time he was interviewed on TV at their home. She had cleaned it for three days, and thought it was spotless, but when the TV lights were on, all the cobwebs in the ceiling were illuminated, all the dust bunnies she missed stood out in the corners, and all the spots on the carpet leapt up. Its no wonder that sometimes we do prefer the darkness. The light sometimes show us things we would rather not see, but choosing darkness is a bit like choosing not to see a doctor because you are afraid he might tell you how sick you really are, or not

looking at your bank book, because you are afraid of how much in debt you might be. Of course the only way to get well, or get out of debt, is to see how bad the problem is.

Jesus said the Kingdom of heaven is at hand, and then he started calling people to follow him. Does it feel like your life is dark? Come follow me. Come serve me. Come learn from me. Learn what a real life is about. The call to follow Jesus is the call to learn what real living is about. It is not a call to join a church, although that might happen if you answer the call of Jesus. It is not a call to become a professional Christian like me, although for some that happens. It is not a call to become a missionary or a minister, it is not a call to quit all you are doing, it is not a call to give all the fun things in your life.

It is a call to life. It is a call to live in the light.

Over the next few weeks, we will be looking at the life and light Jesus offers. Next week we are going to look at the character that comes with the call to live in the light. The week after that, we are going to look at our resources. The week after that, we are going to look at relationships in the Light. If the Presbyterian Church is going to survive, it will do so because it quits playing the survival game, and keeps focused on how we answer the call of Christ. If we survive, it will be because we choose to live in the light, we choose to answer the call of Jesus. That is our hope.