

“A Vocation for Fools and Lunatics”

Preached at
Community United Methodist Church, Romulus MI
Sunday 26 April 2009

If I may, I need to preach to Mr. H for a moment. I realize that you folk have probably wanted me to preach at Mr. H for a while now, but I need to answer a question he tried at Bible Study to ask by not quite getting to the point.

Lee, let me simplify your questions about apologetics with this politically incorrect answer: Of all the religions on the planet, Christianity is the one that provides the best overall value. Here's why:

Nearly all other religions seem to me to be too clean and shiny and ideal. Islam lays out a clear set of rules to follow. Buddhism provides a way out of entrapment to our often troublesome passions. Hinduism provides so many gods that every house can have their own unique favorite. Scientology has lots of great looking Hollywood celebrities in its ranks. All of these seem just a bit too neat and tidy.

Christianity, on the other hand, is messy and ragged around the edges. Its stories are filled with reprobates, murderers, adulterers, cowards, completely dysfunctional families, corrupt kings, a Savior of the World born to an out of wedlock teenager, who takes on as sidekicks 12 guys too ditzzy to figure out who they are following, and who finally wins the day by getting himself killed. The primary Christian symbol is an execution device. If Jesus had been around in, say, the fifties, then Christians would have an electric chair in the front of every church.

Christianity is unique because no one could make this stuff up. It's just too bizarre! In fact, its all so screwy and irrational that it all has to be true!

You see, I really do believe that it's Christianity's messy history and heritage that gives it clear credence. For it centers on real people, real relationships, and the very messy situations that God sorts out with such strategy and subtlety to redeem us from our own self-inflicted wounds. Christianity features a God who has no fear of either the ambiguous gray areas or the stinking slop of real life as we live it. Ours is a God willing to get involved in our dysfunction, put up with our petty irritableness, and pursue us even when we reject him. Ours is a God who, up on the cross, took on our woundedness.

It's all too incredible and logic-defying not to be real.

And because the substance of our faith is real, it is, like life itself, frequently complicated and costly.

If a couple of guys came up with Christianity one night over a pitcher of beer down at the bowling alley then there would surely be some simple rules to follow to guarantee prosperity, happiness, a long and healthy life, lots of friends, popularity, and beautiful, well-mannered children. But since Christianity is real, we are made no promises that our playing by the rules will get us any of those things. In fact if we follow Jesus Christ closely, taking up our cross as we go, we are more apt to give away our money, suffer with others and grieve the brokenness of the world, live a more difficult life, turn off some of our friends, and be less popular. No one promised that cross-bearing would be easy.

Maybe it's the daunting prospect of a cross-bearing career for Jesus' nifty disciples that prompted him to say not once but twice in his first post-resurrection visit, "Peace be with you." Jesus had to be encouraging because he was about to throw a frightening responsibility at them that would hit like a brick through a plate-glass window.

"Okay guys, I'm sending you out to do what I was doing – It's now your turn to bring good news to the poor, help others to see, lead those with wobbly legs along the right path, befriend and love the outcasts, speak truth to power, and preach repentance to prepare for the coming Kingdom of God. This is your task now."

Not only was this a huge responsibility but it was a bone-chilling prospect indeed given that Jesus has just recently been crucified for doing these things.

Life for Jesus' disciples would have been so much easier and worry-free if they hadn't been given Jesus' job to do; if instead they could have settled into a happy hymn and praise song singing retirement. But Jesus was heading back to God's throne room at the home office of Heaven now that his work of reconciling humanity with God was done, and this left the need for someone to continue his preaching and teaching about God's Kingdom. Someone had to share that Jesus had won forgiveness for us, what it means to live a godly life, his healing and helping those in need. It was all work needing to be done before he came back to put a wrap on Creation. And who better to do the work than the guys Jesus had just apprenticed.

But really now, who wants Jesus' job?

But really now, who wants a job leading others to live out a faith that demands that they love God before anyone or anything else, even themselves and their families?

Who wants a job that entails treating our neighbors as good as we treat ourselves?

Who wants a job building a church community that knits us together with people we may not even like and who just make us angry a lot of the time?

Who wants a job reaching out to help others who are not like us, whom we do not trust, or who are not “our own” when doing so means a sacrifice of our own time, effort, treasure, especially in these tough economic times?

Who wants a job disappointing and frustrating people by having to explain that Jesus Christ didn't die on the cross to make them feel happy or uplifted; that he wasn't crucified to see that all their aches and pains are relieved; that his death isn't the doorway to a believer's material prosperity?

Who wants a job reminding people that it is not our illnesses Jesus taught us to pray for but our enemies?

Who wants a job that calls for bearing one's cross daily, not just hear about the idea for a few minutes one day a week?

And who wants a job that comes with the expectation that one should be joyful and thankful for having to do all the other crazy stuff I just mentioned?

I might have been sympathetic if Jesus' disciples all turned in their “Apostle's Union” cards on the spot and returned to fishing, tax collecting, and whatever else they were up to before Jesus came and turned their lives upside down.

If being a disciple of the Crucified Christ sounds like a hard slog then be assured that it sometimes is. But God didn't raise no Son of God so lame as to send out his A-Team without going properly equipped. Jesus accomplished what he wanted to do on earth, and when he turned the remaining work on the street over to his disciples he gave them what they needed to guarantee their success ... as long as they behaved themselves, took Jesus' teaching and example seriously, and relied first and foremost on God.

Just as Jesus finished scaring the “be-Jesus” out of his disciples by saying that they were to go do his work, he breathed on them – Jesus Christ/Messiah/God breathed on them. The Son who was with the Father at Creation, whom John says is the Word that was with God and was God and through whom all things were made (John 1:1-3), who Paul says was before all things and in whom all things hold together (Col 1:17), who said in the beginning, “let us make humans in our image” and then breathed life into us, ... the One who breathed on his disciples saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Not, “do I smell like garlic” or “check out this new breath mint”, but “Receive the Holy Spirit” ... “Receive God to be with you as your source of life, your guide and your strength wherever you go”.

What else could Jesus have given his disciples that would have made them better equipped to continue his work? Lots of money? A big, well furnished building to hold services in? The best praise band available? Armani suits, Italian leather shoes, and a nice car? A great ad campaign? A slick TV show?

None of these would have helped. None of these would have helped them preach Christ crucified – meeting each of us at the point of our need and woundedness in order to lift us up out of and above the muck and mire of sin – the muck and mire of human ego and evil that separates us from God. Only the wisdom and strength of God would help them get that Good News out to a world that was blinded into thinking that it had its own answers, answers that usually had to do with money, power, winners, and losers. Only the encouragement and peace of Christ through his Spirit was enough to feed and satisfy the souls of those he sent to speak and show the alternative of God's Kingdom to a business-as-usual world.

Jesus saw to it that those disciples, and all who followed in his name, would be going equipped with the best – they would be going equipped with the Spirit.

I can imagine things quieting down for a moment and one of Jesus' disciples raising his hand and saying, “But why will anyone listen to us? Why will anyone accept our preaching, teaching, and leadership? You, Jesus, are the Master and Lord, not us.”

It's a powerful objection. Why should anyone accept the words of these very common, rough-round-the-edges guys from a backwater area of Palestine? Why should anyone let these guys challenge their faith, lifestyle, or ways of doing business? Why should these apostles be able to call the shots for the new movement of Jesus' followers

that had been growing around him? Why should anyone listen to us as we preach the faith through our words and actions?

Jesus had given them mission -- to do his work in the world -- and he had equipped them with the Holy Spirit. Only one thing more was needed – the authority to do the work; the authority to do what Jesus was doing.

“If you forgive the sins of any,” Jesus told them, “they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” That this is about the power to forgive others in God's name is just scratching the surface. Forgiveness takes the greatest level of authority for sure, so what Jesus is implying here is that he has invested his disciples with the authority over the church, how it is led, and how it received its instruction through the interpretation of Scriptures that heretofore only Jesus had authority to do. In short, Jesus has given the apostles and all who follow in their vocation, the authority to interpret, teach, preach, and act for God in the name of Christ.

It's an awesome and humbling thing to receive, and it's this authority that grants the church the right to be vitally important in the lives of all who claim Christ.

So there it is: Mission, The Spirit to make the mission successful, and The authority to do the work and change the world.

To each disciple in every church now, in the past, and into the future, Jesus calls down, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit to empower and guide your mission. And I give to you my authority to do my work.” Will we accept this call, this vocation to preach the crucified Christ and bring everything that he means into our world? Will we accept the call to bring Christ's challenge to ungodly speech, behavior, values, ways of doing business and governance? Will we accept the call to be Christ's compassion for those in need even when we are struggling ourselves? Will we accept the call to love like Christ and embrace those we are challenged to love, even amongst ourselves?

Will we accept the call to have faith that God will not fail us, even when things look impossible?

Will we accept the call to put legs under a faith that the world thinks is foolishness and lunacy?

Maybe it's time we put our sensibilities aside and get crazy for Christ!

Amen.