

Down to Basics

Greg Yost

Psalm 112:1-7; Isaiah 58; 1 Corinthians 2:1-9; Matthew 5:13-16

February 6, 2011

[My spouse] Terri and I have often spoken with amazement about how different our own experiences as children growing up in church were from the experience that [our children] Anna and Will are having today, growing up in Circle of Mercy. To demonstrate what I mean, I've worn this special costume today. I think it's called a "suit"; men actually wore these in the church that I went to.

We in the Circle of Mercy gather here from many different places and traditions: evangelical, mainline protestant, Catholic, Anabaptist, unchurched . . . We have a depth and richness of perspective that makes us strong. But sometimes I wonder if we oughtn't be less hesitant in drawing on that past—being careful, of course, to distinguish the good from the bad, the helpful from the less helpful.

Our children and youth, I think, would thank us for that. Talking about faith, and understanding what another person is saying about his or her own faith, is often fraught with confusion; things sometimes get lost in the translation. For reasons that I'll make clear in a moment, I want to spend this time tonight providing you with what I think is some chewable food from the scriptures that can sustain you. And I want to put this in the context of some stories about the church that I attended growing up.

I thought about my old church last week when I walked outside and saw Jack and Graham [Whitehouse] shooting on our new basketball goal. When I was their age, I *never* went to church without my basketball. For me the benediction at the end of a church service was more or less the same thing as the prayer they say before the game starts. So before I get to the lectionary texts tonight, let me tell you a little bit about my church.

Dry Ponds Union Church was about an hour and a half east of here in southern Caldwell County. What's a "Union Church?" you might ask. The answer to that goes back about a hundred years ago, when the residents of the rural, crossroads community of Dry Ponds organized a Sunday school for themselves that met in their schoolhouse. They didn't have money, though, and so at first couldn't afford a real church building or a regular pastor. The way they handled the pastor problem was pretty unusual in a time marked by denominational rivalries—they rotated between whatever traveling preacher was available to come preach, no matter what his denominational label was.

By the time my family joined Dry Ponds in the late '70s, the church was predominantly Baptist, but once a month this wizened little octogenarian Methodist preacher named Preacher Crawford took the pulpit. He was dry, dry as dust, but he was adored by the contingent of old Methodist widows who all sat together up in front on the right. These ladies all had old-fashioned sounding names like "Aunt Hettie", "Aunt Lillia Mae", and "Aunt Maggie Azor." I asked my mom one time why they all sat on pillows during church. She said that they all had hemorrhoids.

I had a regular seat in church, too. It was third pew back, far left. From that vantage point I soaked in songs, sermons, and prayers—everything that community of believers had to offer me from my sixth-grade year until I finally left for good during college.

It was quite a different place from here. For one thing, everyone in the church was either directly related or related through marriage, except for my family and one other family. Also, my mom and dad and maybe three or four young adults in their mid-20s were the only ones in the church to have attended college. The congregation was working-class, and many were employed in the nearby furniture mills.

The worship style was a lot different there, too. Preachers never wrote out their sermons or even used notes. The first time I saw a preacher read from a prepared text in college, I was shocked and a little

disgusted. The singing, especially choir specials, drew heavily on southern gospel and focused practically all of its attention on heaven and how great it would be to finally get there.

Do you know what the streets are like in heaven? I do. They're made of pure gold. And while you may think of that as some sort of a metaphor, I assure you that there are others in this world who hear and accept it as matter-of-factly as they hear a road report on the local news.

You can tell that I remember that church fondly. It had a lot of flaws, and some of them were major. But it also had a warm spirit and did a few things really well, without even trying.

It's hard to remember now, but there was a time when a church bell wasn't added as a quaint decoration, but actually could be heard across farm fields calling a community together for worship. Dry Ponds had a big bell on a rope that did just that, and it rang out three times a week. That constancy and regularity, the sheer number of hours spent gathered in prayer and song—which I admit I often longed to be free of—does have the potential to mold character and faith in a way that goes deeper than many contemporary churches' attempts to demonstrate their relevance through riffing off of the surrounding consumer culture. In all honesty, I wouldn't go back to my old church today, with its regrettable blind spots and its stifling lack of curiosity. But I can recommend to you the simple tenacity with which it often pursued piety and spiritual life.

So that spirit is what I'd like to take as my model now as I share some thoughts about our lectionary passages. I actually don't have anything provocative or original to say about any of them. But when I read the four of them, I was strongly convicted that each one was worth hearing out loud here tonight. Let's move through them and see what they have to say. Then at the end, maybe we can put them together into something good that we can carry away with us.

The first passage is Psalm 112:1-7:

Praise the Lord!

*Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments.
Their descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever.
They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.
It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice.
For the righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever.
They are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.*

The Old Testament can be scary and strange. There's brutality, inexplicable purity codes that we can't really understand, and a God who demands blood sacrifices. It's a little overwhelming, and it doesn't help that in every generation there are always vindictive, hateful people who eagerly adopt isolated Old Testament passages to justify their own particular xenophobias. But don't let those people rob you of the chance to hear the Word of God in these ancient books.

This passage from Psalms reminds me of my grandmother Elsie, who reread the Bible through each year for more than half a century. *Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments.* Those words from the first verse would describe my grandmother, an intelligent, but very simple, woman, who in her last years was loved and respected as a Bible teacher by the church at Dry Ponds. She wasn't complicated. Her ethos could essentially be summarized as "Honor God with your whole life."

Not by scholarship, but through persistence, my grandmother bridged the chronological and cultural gulf so that the prophets, kings, and judges, the heroes and heroines of ancient Israel, spoke once more.

I think her great accomplishment as a Christian and a reader was that by returning so often to the biblical texts, she made the people in them live again. Not by scholarship, but through persistence, she bridged the chronological and cultural gulf so that the prophets, kings, and judges, the heroes and heroines of ancient Israel, spoke once more. She listened closely to the whole of their lives, both their triumphs and mistakes, and distilled from it all not a poisonous fundamentalism, but the same simple intuition of the psalmist who says of the gracious, the merciful, and the righteous that “they are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.” That’s a promise we can find comfort in today as well.

The second lectionary passage is from Isaiah 58:

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

This passage from Isaiah is justifiably famous. It challenges us. It keeps us on our toes. If we are too quick to claim the blessings described earlier by the psalmist and we haven’t examined ourselves for hypocrisy, then we earn the same rebuke that Isaiah delivered to Judah: God condemns religious posturing.

More to the point, God condemns hypocritical attempts to manipulate divine power. Misguided fools then and now say, “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” God’s answer is that the trappings of religiosity obscure the heart of God’s will for the world, which is justice for the weak and the vulnerable. Justice is God’s non-negotiable demand that individuals or nations ignore at their peril.

Yet there’s a promise as well as a threat. When the hungry are fed and the homeless poor are welcomed into our homes, God pledges restoration and healing. Then we will call, and God will answer.

Isaiah gets down to basics here. God is not capricious and doesn't leave us guessing. What God requires is that we show the same love for each other that God has for each of us.

Our third lectionary passage is 1 Corinthians 2:1-9:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

Most of you probably know this already, but this is the Apostle Paul, speaking here to the church that he helped found in the Greek city of Corinth. These words can be dated pretty reliably to the mid-'50s, hardly twenty years after the death of Jesus. They are among the earliest writings we have from the church, older by far than the gospels or the book of Acts.

Paul, then, by virtue of his early arrival on the scene, as well as his great energy and intellect, is an important figure to us as Christians. Unfortunately, Paul is often regarded with the same apprehension that the Old Testament generates. Is Paul a heavy-handed apologist for hierarchy or a deadly enemy of women and homosexuals? There are scoundrels who will be only too happy to portray him that way.

But if that's been your impression of Paul, let me urge you to reconsider. A fair interpretation of Paul requires consideration of many technical textual and theological questions. However, when you work your way through the confusing overlays, what you then find is what earned Paul his place in the canon in the first place.

Paul tells us that salvation, be it from the diabolical powers at large in the world or just from the dark places within ourselves, isn't something we can hope to accomplish on our own. We are wholly dependent on God's decisive intervention in Jesus Christ for our liberation. But what sets Paul's message apart from many who later succeeded him is his understanding of faith. Faith for Paul doesn't mean checking off points of agreement with some arbitrary list of propositional truths. Thinking the right things about God, Jesus, theology, human nature, politics, or whatever simply doesn't amount to anything ultimately. Faith for Paul, rather, is an attitude of trust in God. It implies a relationship with the God who is made known in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

If you'll remember, in verse 3 Paul tells the Corinthians, "I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." Think back to Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, when he encountered the risen Christ in a shattering vision that left him blind, weak, and unable to eat or drink. From the beginning, Paul grappled in his own body with the paradox that God's strong power was necessarily connected to weakness.

As a student of philosophy, he recognized how unpersuasive his claims of Christ's Lordship were to the learned. As a missionary and a political realist, he saw how powerful and unyielding the Roman Empire was and how pitifully marginal believers were in comparison.

For Paul, a working mystic, the Resurrection went so much further than "Yay! Jesus was dead, but now he's not!" Paul sees in the cross a lens which brings the collision of God and the world into sharp focus. The violence, the sin, which Jesus bore on the cross, was the price that had to be paid for

disarming the powers of death. Paul's gift to us is his keen appreciation that following Jesus means sharing that weakness and vulnerability. There was and never will be a true gospel which omits this hard fact.

The fourth and last lectionary passage is Matthew 5:13-16:

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

This is Jesus speaking in the Sermon on the Mount. Can you see now why I think I was dealt a winning lectionary hand? Isaiah 58 and the Sermon on the Mount on the same Sunday! Usually I'm left scratching my head over whether Hebrew dietary laws or being a high priest after the order of Melchizedek makes the better sermon subject.

I am happy to close tonight with these words from Jesus, because I thrill to them: "You are the salt of the earth. . . You are the light of the world." People draw their strength and inspiration from different places in scripture. I think my grandmother loved her stories from the Old Testament. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others have plainly resonated with the prophets like Isaiah. Paul inspires both those with a passion for evangelism and those who have experienced a weight of sin lifted from them by God's grace.

But I think I find my spiritual home here with Jesus, as he shares with his followers the contagious excitement of the God Movement. I can feel myself in the crowd, being electrified by the audacity of what I'm hearing and my immediate desire to be a part of it.

Jesus contains everything our tradition has pointed toward, some of which we've discussed tonight, such as the psalmist's regard for righteousness and Isaiah's insistence on justice and authenticity. Moreover, the hillside location away from the halls of power and the callused hands of Jesus' listeners both portend, as Paul understood, that the wisdom Jesus brings is not going to be recognized by the rulers of this age. But the bitterness of Golgotha lies for now in the future.

Jesus speaks to us not as abject subjects in a Kingdom already accomplished, but as collaborators in a Reign awaiting establishment.

Jesus, I feel, speaks to us in this moment not as abject subjects in a Kingdom already accomplished, but as collaborators in a Reign awaiting establishment. There's work to be done that will leave both us and the world radically changed for the better, and Jesus' determination and joyful resolve to begin this revolution are palpable. That as much as anything is what I respond to and want to follow.

At Dry Ponds we concluded every service with the pastor extending an invitation for decisions. Then a closing hymn would be sung and a person could, if they desired, put their hymn book down and walk to the front to signify that a step had been taken and a response had been made.

I believe that this tradition is fundamentally sound. We are meant to consider God's claim on our lives and then to respond. We are meant to do it all through our lives, from whatever young age we are when we first hear the call to whatever age we may be when we recognize that the Spirit is beckoning us to go further on our journey than we had previously dared.

Here at Circle of Mercy we have our own traditions. And our invitation, which Mahan [Siler] will offer in a moment, is to the table. We move to this table together, not individually, and I like what that says.

But the way of Jesus isn't easy. Faith journeys happen when we commit ourselves to them. Being beloved of God is God's gracious gift to all Her children, but walking with Jesus requires a conscious choice. As you step forward tonight, I ask you to consider what response you might want to make to God's leading in your life.

Amen.