

Speaking of Faith – Not Lectionary Readings

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter - Year C - 06/02/2019

Psalm Reading: 96

1<sup>st</sup> Reading: 1 Peter 3:15-22, 2<sup>nd</sup>: Matt. 28:18-20

One of the most difficult things for us to do as Christians is discuss our faith with other people. There is a natural reticence which must be overcome. I think it is partly because by talking about our faith we are revealing something very basic about ourselves. We are making ourselves vulnerable. It is rather like putting on a bathing suit early in the summer and taking a dip in Lake Huron. You are a little apprehensive about revealing skin that has not seen the light of day for six months and on plunging in the water, you might just get a chilly reception.

In this day and age, especially in the country in which we live, with its powerful secular culture, there are those who frown upon people discussing their Christian faith in public, as if the separation of church and state means the total suppression of the church. But you know there is nothing in the constitution and certainly not in the rules of etiquette that say we cannot talk about our beliefs. Conversely, even a cursory reading of the New Testament reveals that we are, in fact, called on to talk about our faith. Our Gospel reading for today makes this pretty clear.

Our reading comes from the last three verses of the book of Matthew. After the crucifixion, Jesus meets the eleven remaining Apostles in Galilee on a mountain. And on that mountain Jesus speaks some of his final instructions to them before he ascends to heaven. Jesus begins by telling them, “All

authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” (NIV, Matt. 28:18) This means that Jesus is lord of all whether spiritual or physical, and it is from God that Christ has received this power. Whatever Jesus proclaims then, is authoritative and true. The apostles must take whatever Jesus says then as an imperative, an order that must be carried out.

The next word carries a lot of weight. Jesus says, “Therefore”! The Greek word here is *oun* (*ouv*) which is a common conjunction also meaning “so” or “so then”. It means that the order coming next is not only a command but also a logical conclusion of the power that Jesus has been given. And the command that is given is to “make disciples of all nations.” (v.9) This is what Jesus wants the apostles to do...make people followers of Christ. There is only one way to make disciples, and that is to convince others of the truth that Jesus is the Lord of all.

But there is something even deeper going on here within these final words of the Gospel of Matthew. Throughout the Gospel the apostles are always referred to as simply “the” disciples. These are the people who have been closest to Jesus throughout his ministry. So when Jesus tells the apostle/disciples to turn all peoples, all nations, into disciples he is talking about bringing the world as close to Christ, as close to God, as the apostles themselves were close to Christ. He is telling them to cultivate a relationship between everyone in the world and God that is so close it will be as if they walked and talked with Jesus throughout his ministry, even as the apostles did. It sounds like a pretty tall order!

But I think it is doable if we first ask ourselves, “What is the job of a disciple?” Answer: It is to become like the master. We are already made in the image of God. This means that the mandate of Jesus is for the disciples, for us, to help people to become more like Christ, to conform more closely to the image we already carry with in us. But since we are fallible humans this work to perfect ourselves does not come to completion in our life time. So discipleship presumes the disciple will work diligently and perhaps perpetually toward that end. So really, discipleship is about being set on a path that leads toward a close relationship with God. Discipleship and helping others to be disciples then sounds a little more doable. It does not sound quite so impossible. Doesn't it?

This passage we have been discussing, in theological circles, is often called “The Great Commission”. It is a command that Christ gives us to carry out, and it culminates with “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all I have commanded you.” (v.19) It is what we, as Christians, are commanded and committed to do.

Logically, there is only one way we can do what Christ tells us to do here: we have to communicate with others. You see, we have to talk to people. We must talk to people about our faith!

Now, let us jump from our reading from Matthew over to the First Letter of Peter where Peter gives us some idea about how we can do this talking thing. He begins, “In your hearts revere Christ as Lord.” (1 Peter 3:15) If we are going to talk to people about our faith, that might be a good place to start.

Come at it from a perspective of conviction. Know and love Christ and accept Christ as Lord of our hearts.

Next he says, “Always be prepared to give an answer to every one who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” This means, be prepared! But, you know I don’t think it means that you have to have a theological point for every question that someone might ask you about. This is a call for a personal response, to help people understand why it is that you have made the choice that you have made to be a Christian. Nothing is so compelling as a personal testimony. People can understand it when you tell them that your faith helped you to overcome an addiction, or brought you comfort in difficult times, or that it sometimes fills you with wonder and hope, or that it focuses you on the lives of others in a narcissistic world.

Most people are not going to care about your topic if you give a twenty minute dissertation on how the Trinity is a singular God. Though theology is important, it is probably not the thing that truly draws us to Christianity. What is important are the personal relationships it fosters. So, as you can see, the best way you can talk about your faith is through a revelation of what God has done for us. Yes, this is a little like going to a public beach in a bathing suit, but it is also a liberating moment. People come to know who you are and see the beauty that is inside you that image of God that drives you to be a good person. They come to see the benefits of your faith and come to think about what it can do for them.

Then Peter writes, “But do this with gentleness and respect...” (v.15 cont.) He is saying don’t be too pushy, but be

confident and consistent. You don't get people to start reading the Bible by grabbing them by the collar and pushing them up against the wall. You don't do it by enumerating their sins and telling them they are going to burn in hell. That might be on the agenda, but you and I are not the judge of heaven and earth and it is not yours or mine to say. Besides, we are all sinners, and far be it from us to pass judgment. The important thing to remember is that we are all made in the image of God and we all deserve respect. Besides, a gentle word will carry weight and invective simply creates resistance.

Finally, Peter reminds us to "keep a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (v.16 cont.) What is he really talking about here? He is saying be on your best behavior all of the time. Perhaps the best way to exhibit Christ's love and the benefits of Christ's church is to live a good life. When people see your calm confidence, when they see your respect for others, when they see your dedication to maintaining right relationships with God, with each other, with the environment, with all humanity, they will want to know how you do it. You may have heard the song..."They will know we are Christians by our love." (Dave sings refrain.) This is perhaps the most effective way that we speak out about our faith, through our actions. You have no doubt heard it said that actions speak louder than words. It is true.

So, when is the right time to talk about our faith to others? Well, anytime of course, but some times are better than others. You will know when the Spirit puts that niggling in the back of

your mind. When you are thinking should I? Or shouldn't I? The answer is probably, "Yes!"

At that moment you may feel like you are standing in your bathing suit on the beach. The cool breeze is blowing and the waters are cold on your toes. But we all know that once you wade in and your body acclimates itself, you will be up to your neck in water, able to swim gracefully about. And you will surprise yourself at finding how good it feels immersing yourself with others in the Word of the Lord, making of yourself and others disciples of Jesus Christ.

Please bow your heads and pray with me...

Loving God, You called us to make disciples of all nations. And so we bring your message into the world. Lord, give us the courage to speak your word. Give us the wisdom to know when to speak. Help us to live exemplary lives that we might exhibit your love in our own actions. Give us knowledge and understanding so that we are effective in our efforts. Lord, we bring your word into the local community. Give us the resources to reach the far corners of the planet. For all of this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord...

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