

March 11, 2007  
Wellington UCC  
Randall Doubet King

Psalm 63:1-8  
Isaiah 55:1-9  
1 Corinthians 10:1-13  
Luke 13:1-9

“Street Preacher”

Listen for the word of God, still speaking, as I read from the teachings of the early Church as recorded in 1 Corinthians 10 and Luke 13.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts draw us into the presence of God so that we might find strength and wisdom for the coming days.

He stands there on State Street nearly every day – sometimes in front of Old Navy, sometimes on the west side of the street. He is always neatly dressed, wearing a suit, crisp white shirt and tie. In one hand he holds a microphone attached to an amp – which is clearly set to maximize volume while not violating the city’s noise ordinance. In the other hand he holds a Bible, more as prop than text, for the words of Scripture are imprinted on his soul and flow forth as easily as Shakespeare does from Emma Thompson or Sir Laurence Olivia

And, like the writer of 1 Corinthians, or the Jesus recorded in Luke 13, or even the suffering servant of Isaiah, in the third lesson assigned for this day, he calls us to repentance. Repent for the time is at hand.

He makes us uncomfortable for a host of reasons. Every time I walk by

First, even though I try to tune him out, to concentrate on the task at hand that propels me down State Street, I still hear a theme or rant that angers me

- usually something about abortion
- or a commentary on gay marriage
- or he comments on things that have no moral significance except in the narrow confines of his ethical universe

in his call to personal repentance he gets so many things wrong – there is a disturbing bigotry in his words

And I am uncomfortable and even angry because in his preaching Christian faith is reduced exclusively to issues of private morality – I want to pick up my own bull horn and take a position across the street and declare that god is calling us to repent our collective guilt

- guilt for the war in Iraq
- guilt for our ignorance of the plight of the people in Afghanistan because we are unable to distinguish between US arrogance and the collective need of the world to care when a nation simply is overwhelmed – between policing and empire building
- I want to call the passers by to repent our obscene consumption of the world’s fossil fuels – in deed the headlong plunge into an environmental apocalypse
  - repent - the exploitation of foreign workers – and workers here in the US
  - repent - the second class status of the majority of the households in America – those that are not one man/one women/and 2.5 children and who would not be chosen to replace the Cleavers in a re-make of “Leave to Beaver”
  - repent - health care disparities
  - repent - the lack of reproductive justice as an aspect in the unequal status of women on the world scene
  - repent - the neglect of the most vulnerable in our midst

So, he makes me uncomfortable for good reason. I am offended by his bigotry and outraged by the narrowness of his judgment. Yet . . . I wonder some times if he does not also bother me, at least a little bit, because in his crude way, he is confronting me with a truth from within my own tradition, a truth that I choose to ignore

that book he waves with abandon and quotes with such ease, is my sacred text as well – it is the word I continue to engage and to allow to engage me – not because I believe this bible to be more true than the texts of other religions, or more valid than the longings or dreams or reflections of those who have abandoned entirely the notion of a god who speaks – I continue to claim this text because in it, and in the conversation it has provoked for 2000 years, I have found strength and direction and hope

so, when he waves it, and acts on it there in the public, I am forced to stop and reflect – what has he seen? What has he heard? Is God still speaking – even through him?

One element of his gospel is that proverbial street preacher theme – the end is near. That idea clearly is woven throughout the texts assigned for today. Hundreds die – a tower falls – people are killed by the agents of an evil government. “The end is near.”

The notion that life can be painfully short was hardly startling for those who lived in the time of Paul or Jesus or Isaiah. Theirs was a world of high infant mortality, a world where women who were fertile had a significant chance of dying in the act of child birth, a world where a simple infection could mean death, where people literally starved to death in times of draught or other natural disasters – of course, if we define “world” as the globe rather than where you and I live - that is still the reality – but for most of us the world is what we see here – and what we see on the way home – and death is not a large part of our living. Even when it strikes for one of us, our folkways now quickly hide the fact of death away – ship the dying to hospitals, keep it behind doors, do our grieving without public signs, and move on.

Consequently we function most of the time ignoring our precarious state.

A number of years ago I was serving on a pastoral care advisory council for a local hospital – one of my responsibilities was to take part in group conversations with medical staff on issues that they raised with the chaplain – one conversation remains with me after many years.

A third year ob/gyn resident had asked to present a case. She had been called one night to assist in the emergency room. A pregnant woman had been brought in by her husband. The patient was in clear distress. During the exam, she suddenly stopped breathing, goes into full cardiac arrest. The resident recounted jumping on top of her, performing CPR, trying to pound life back into the women. None of this was a new experience, her response was automatic – what was new for the resident was that in the midst of attempting, unsuccessfully it turned out, to revive the patient, she saw herself. She had seen death countless times – disease, injury, aging, but never before had there been a twenty something white women in apparent good health – dead there on the table.

When I was active in pastoral ministry, moving in and out of hospitals, being called on to help people at the end of life and even more often, called on to assist families in the rituals of letting go, death was much more a part of life. Now, death is rare for me – True, in the past four years Sally and I have let go of her father, my father, and my mother. These deaths were real to us – the impact significant – but it was not about our dying. That sort of thing happens only when a Christmas card arrives from a peer saying – a good year, I survived a crisis with my heart and I am back at work.

9/11 was a collective experience of our mortality – and our collective response as a nation – a collective willingness to abandon freedoms and to embrace violence – suggest that we were not sufficiently attuned to the precariousness of our existence

We need to pause from time to time and reflect that life is a gift – that the only sure thing is this very moment. That is what the call of Lent is about – it is the moment of the liturgical year when we are

called to live in the shadow of the cross – the shadow of our own mortality – to reflect on how we are doing – and to seek change

Let me try to put this differently. Because it is about more than the simple fascination with dieing.

Some of you may have known James Yellowbank. James was of the Winnebago people of Wisconsin. He was well known in social justice circles around the city. When I met him in Uptown he was a part of the Anawim Center, a ministry of the Catholic archdiocese of Chicago for Native people. (I heard that James died a few years ago. When I googled to confirm . . . Chief Illiniwik)

As a young man, caught up in the Civil Rights movement, and the anti-war movement, and especially in the Indian rights movement, he found himself growing increasingly angry and bitter, overwhelmed by his sense of powerlessness. So he returned to his tribal home and sought out the wisdom of the one of the village elders.

He went to the old man's house and poured out his heart. There is so much injustice, so much that needs to be done, and so little hope for change. What can I do? There was silence – and then the old man spoke: Tend your garden.

Tend your garden.

The words echoed for James throughout his years that followed that encounter, years when he was at the forefront in the battle for justice. He was transformed not in what he did so much as to how he looked to himself in the midst of his struggles

Tend your garden - words that still echo for me, when I allow myself to enter a Lenten space and hear anew – the end - your end - is near.

Which brings me back to my friend at State and Washington: The end is near, Repent

Will the ushers come forward with the sack cloth and ashes – and when we are ready we can make our loud lamentations and shed our tears. Maybe some will want to take the hymnal solidly in both hands begin beating yourself on the head.

Somehow I believe that captures our sense of what it means to repent. Without getting out our Greek texts or doing elaborate word studies, I would like to suggest that the idea is something simpler and more direct.

Consider that you are driving down the high way, looking for an exit. You turn left, as directed and then right and then a slight left and you find yourself . . . in a dark alley or an open field and no where near a hotel parking lot where you were to meet a friend for dinner. (In fact you are no where near anything or anybody.) The act of repentance is not a) cursing the stupidity of mapquest or b) berating yourself for not looking at a map, or c) shouting at your partner for not stopping and asking for directions when it first became obvious that you were in trouble.

Repentance, instead, is the act of turning around and heading in a new direction.

Little Miss Sunshine.

Repent what – which gets us in to the messy stuff – if I say we need to repent our power and privilege – surely there is someone here who needs to hear for the first time, “you are powerful and privileged. Stand tall and rejoice.” If I say that we spend too much time focused on ourselves and are too little aware of the needs of those around us, surely there is someone here today who needs to hear a call to repent precisely because in the name of selflessness they are destroying the very gift of life that God has given.

It is hard to unpack – it is too easy to be misheard. I say, Sit up straight. Those of you with good posture, make an effort to be even more rigid while others – like me – do not even recognize a problem.

Repent. There are so many directions we could go. When Barbara and I sat down this week to work through the texts, it became evident that I could talk about almost anything. Both the text in 1 Corinthians and the passage from the Gospel are actually the concluding remarks of much larger litanies about personal behavior and the call to repentance – sexual mores, wealth and privilege, spiritual arrogance, a lack of gratitude, pride, sloth – a failure to adequately steward our relationships. There is no shortage of places to begin to weed and cultivate in the garden of our lives.

Strange. From this pulpit or in joys and concerns, we are very comfortable to speak about the conduct of the war in Iraq or to lay out plans for universal health care or advocate for a city wide set aside ordinance. But ask me if you should take this new job, or if so and so is a good life time partner, or if buying or renting is the right thing to do, we get tongue tied.

Maybe it is why, like you, I want to move on quickly to the global aspects of the gospel, and trust that if I am on the right side of justice, I am walking in the right way.

What I am asking today is: Can we walk and chew gum spiritually? Not to lay down the work of justice, but to tend to the personal at the same time. Even as we focus on the global issues, can we also take the time – at least occasionally – to look within and ask how we might change and grow – how we might realize a shalom, not just for the world, but for ourselves.

So I thank the preacher for the good word he proclaims for me – though surely he would be as surprised as I am that I say so.

Repent – the end is near. Embrace the fragility of life even as you are a part of its greatness.

But to be honest, I am still uncomfortable – and not with the preacher alone, but with the texts that are the basis of his preaching. For the call to repentance in Paul and in the Gospel clearly is based on a understanding this is a question of eternity. We are called to repent not just in this moment, but in some reality that is yet to be revealed.

And to be honest, that place/that realm is not something that draws me.

So why should I do it.

I have two responses – one of the head and one of the heart.

From the head – a friend of mine converted to Judaism a few years back – assisted by a Reform Rabbi. The issue of kosher came up – “Do I have to keep kosher?” The response – Kosher is a gift. As you keep it, you enjoy its benefits. When you do not, the benefits are not present. There is no punishment.

In a very profound sense, embracing life in the moment, turning toward that which is good and just is its own reward.

There are examples of this all around us. Look to the life of Jesus. A large part of Gospels recount the journey to Jerusalem. In each of the four narratives there comes a point when Jesus understands that he must go to Jerusalem to die. Jesus learns to live in the shadow of the cross – to live as one who is about to die.

And if we review those narratives of Jesus on the journey, we find him again and again, stopping with friends, eating and drinking – even a rather interesting scene where he enjoys the sensual touch of a woman who the crowd, at least, sees to be a prostitute.

In my head I know that the way of living that is conscious of mortality and turned toward goodness is, in itself, a life worth living.

And then there are the reasons of my heart. And to express these I must turn to the poetry of Psalm 63 – and I will give the Psalmist the final word.