

September 10, 1972
Micah 6:6-8; Mark 12:29-31
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FAITH AND FOOLISHNESS

Back in the 1920's William Inge, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, and sometimes known as the "gloomy dean", wrote a book entitled Labels And Libels. It was a good book if only for the title for most labels are libels. They never give us the whole story and when we are confronted with labels we often have a preconceived idea pop into our mind which is not in conformity with the facts.

Two of the most ill-used labels in our time are "liberal" and "conservative". They are misused and misunderstood in economics, in politics and in religion, and are often used to malign those whose views differ from our own.

This morning we wish to speak of "liberal Christianity" as opposed to "conservative" or "evangelical" Christianity. I consider myself to be a liberal Christian and if I read this congregation aright, it is a congregation composed, for the most part, of liberal Christians. This has nothing to do with economics or politics. A liberal Christian is one who dares to examine and question historical religion and who feels that even the Bible needs to be approached with an inquiring and a questioning mind. A liberal Christian does not accept religious beliefs just because they are old or merely because they have the weight of orthodoxy behind them. A liberal Christian does not believe that the Christian life can be defined by a creed or by a neat little theological formula which, in effect, says, "Believe this, and this, and this, and you are a Christian."

Why are we talking about this subject on the first Sunday of the new church year? For two reasons. First, there is a growing movement in this country toward a much more conservative Christianity. The Jesus movement among young people is one example. Secondly, because at the beginning of a new church year we ought to challenge ourselves with the task of becoming better informed and more deeply dedicated Christians, and that requires work and study and the use of our most critical faculties.

II

During the past summer I watched, as did many of you, the televised account of Explo '72 taking place in Houston, Texas. It was a thrilling thing to see those thousands of teenagers gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ. One had to admire their apparent devotion. The joy and excitement on those youthful faces gave one a new sense of hope for the future. It was indeed an inspiring event.

Nevertheless, one doubt kept nagging at the edge of my mind, for the religious faith which I heard expounded there pretty much consisted of a completely literal interpretation of the Bible and an evangelical approach to Christianity which often would deny the

individual believer the right to doubt or to question any of the traditionally accepted dogmas of historical and orthodox Christianity.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead is a liberal Christian whom I have greatly admired through the years. I concur in his appraisal of Jesus Christ's attitude toward his followers:

"I feel that Christ would admit into discipleship anyone who sincerely desired to follow him, and allow that disciple to make his creed out of his experience; to listen, to consider, to pray, to follow, and ultimately to believe only those convictions about which the experience and fellowship made him sure... Unless we can break out of the prison of old fashioned expressions, creeds, and formularies, we shall never be free to find the far more glorious truths which are inherent in the Christian religion." (1)

The conservative, the evangelical, the fundamentalist, often identifies Christianity with a recipe for salvation. The liberal Christian does not believe that Jesus Christ came to earth merely to tell the individual how he could get to heaven, but also to tell mankind how heaven could come to earth. This is the social aspect of Christianity. In other words, what we are contending for this morning is the use of reason in religion. Thirty years ago one of my theological professors used to condemn those Christians who come to church on Sunday and "park their brains in the narthex". Man is a rational being and he ought not vacate his reason when he turns to matters religious.

A few years ago the Pilgrim Fellowship of this church invited a number of persons from other Christian denominations to discuss with them their distinctive religious beliefs. It was an interesting series of programs and young people seem always to be curious concerning other denominations and religions than their own, although, like their elders, they often know very little about their own. One program consisted of two young men describing the beliefs of a relatively small denomination, during the course of which frequent reference was made to revelations supposedly experienced by that group's prophet and founder.

Some of our young people were genuinely bothered by this constant reference to revelation whenever difficult theological and philosophical problems would arise. They asked me later about it and I gave them the only answer I knew, which was that when one is confronted by someone else's revelation, his only legitimate response must be, "I will believe your revelation, or that of your prophet, when I have had a revelation telling me that your revelation is genuine".

I have known very few persons who have claimed to have spiritual revelations. Those whom I have known have certainly been genuinely convinced that their revelation was authentic. The difficulty often is that not all so-called revelations are in agreement, and some are often blatantly contradictory. In the same fashion there are many

passages in the Bible that are in outright contradiction. When two revelations thus negate one another what is one to do? Obviously he must apply the element of rationality. God does not reveal to one man that murder is good and to another that it is bad. The barest minimum of reason should convince us of that.

When one is confronted with a claimed revelation he must of necessity apply a few rational tests. Is this person claiming to have had a spiritual revelation the kind of religiously sincere and mature person who would be likely to have a sudden insight into God's truth? Because all things are possible to God does not mean that just anything is likely to happen. Does this claimed revelation seem consistent with that truth which man has obtained through other sources? Or, in order to believe this religious truth must one force himself to deny all other truth?

The minute some persons hear the arguments I am presenting this morning they tend to throw up their hands in horror and exclaim, "Reason must keep its hands off the Word of God." But how do we discover it to be the Word of God if we do not examine it with a degree of reason? Blind faith is a contradiction in terms. If there is no evidence on which to base a choice, then one does not have faith, he has nothing but a wistful and naive hope.

III

Everyone knows that Socrates was a great philosopher. As the little school boy once put it, "Socrates was a wise man who went around giving everyone good advice. They finally poisoned him." Most people also know that a record of Socrates' wisdom and insight was preserved by one of his students named Plato. It is Socrates who is recorded by Plato to have said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." This morning we change two words in that famous quote and assert that "The unexamined faith is not worth having."

One must, of course, recognize the sentimental attachment most of us have to the religion of our childhood. It is to be almost sacrilegious in the eyes of some to assert that "the old-time religion" which was good enough for father and mother is not good enough for us. But is the "old-time" practice of medicine good enough for us, or the "old-time" dentistry? Would we be satisfied with the "old-time" automobiles, ice-boxes, wood stoves and outdoor plumbing which were good enough for our fathers? And certainly, in their day the "old-time religion" was not good enough for Jesus or Paul, or Martin Luther, or the Pilgrim Fathers.

What is the "old-time" religion? Burning heretics at the stake, drowning witches, barking like dogs and climbing trees as the emotional result of revival meetings, are all part of the "old-time" religion, as was the violent animosity and hatred which once existed between various Christian groups. When I was young I was not permitted to date members of certain other Christian churches. I was told by some adults that Roman Catholics had guns and ammunition stored in every

church basement. Is that the kind of "old-time" religion that is good enough for us? And what are we to do with all of the new discoveries of science? Are we to close our eyes against all that might jeopardize a cherished religious dogma, or are we to dream for ourselves an even greater God than man has ever known before?

It will be said of course that the important thing is faith. The "faith of our fathers" is good enough for us. But is it? One must admire the quantity of faith that motivated certain of our fathers to struggle and sacrifice for that in which they believed. But few of us today can accept the quality or the content of that Calvinistic faith--which in our case, as Congregationalists, motivated the Pilgrim Fathers--a predestination which really left the individual with little or no freedom. You were saved or you were damned and you yourself had very little choice in the matter. Is that the kind of religious faith that is good enough for us?

We have often been led to believe that a child-like faith is a beautiful thing, and it is--in a child. But it is not a beautiful thing in a mature adult. The adult should have learned how to use that magnificent gift of God, the human brain. In matters religious, as in all other matters, he should be willing and able to reason.

We are certainly not suggesting that there is no room for emotion or sentiment in religion. On the contrary, a religion void of emotion is an empty and a dead thing. But a religion based purely on emotion and bereft of all reason is a most dangerous thing which can lead all the way from narrow-mindedness to outright persecution.

IV

Labels are libels and God does not judge us by the labels which we wear or which others pin on us. Rather He judges us by the love and charity and justice which we cherish in our hearts.

The founder of the Methodist Church, John Wesley, once said something, the truth of which I have always cherished: "If your heart is as my heart give me your hand." If you love God, if you are seeking to know God, if you are trying to practice the love, the understanding, the forgiveness which you see in Jesus Christ, give me your hand. In that case I don't care what church you belong to, or what name you apply to your religious practices; I don't care what you believe about the virgin birth or the immaculate conception, or even about the divinity of Jesus Christ. Jesus never asked his disciples to believe any of these things. He merely said, "Follow me". This is the Old Testament religion and the New Testament religion. Hear it again from Micah and from Jesus:

"What doth the Lord require of thee," said Micah,
"but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly
with thy God."

When Jesus heard the young lawyer say that the first commandment was to love God with all one's heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love one's neighbor as himself, Jesus replied:

"You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

This is the beginning of a new church year. Will you use it as an opportunity to examine your faith, to deepen your faith, and to express your faith?