

Resurrecting the Inquisition

Jeremiah 31: 31-4
Hebrews 5: 7-10

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There is parable of sorts that is shared between clergy, and I share with you with some fear and trepidation, lest I share some professional secret. Apparently, an ecumenical worship service was being held that included persons from a variety of religious traditions. While the meeting was in progress someone rushed in and shouted that the "building was on fire!" The following is the response:

The Methodists gathered in a corner and had a prayer meeting.

The Baptists cried "Where's the water?"

The Presbyterians elected a chairman who was to appoint a committee to look into the matter.

Some of the Fundamentalists shouted, "This is the vengeance of God!"

The Lutherans, after debating for a time, posted a notice declaring that fire is evil.

The Catholics passed the collection plate one more time.

The Episcopalians formed a procession and marched out grandly.

The Congregationalists, on the other hand, shouted, "Everybody for himself! Run for your lives!"

This characterization is used to draw the image of religious pluralism across our minds.

This pluralism has given America religions that have cultic practices strangely different from Christianity as a whole. As a culture, we have been enriched by the "fact that Christianity is one way in the midst of other ways..."(Cobb,p.18) In our efforts to support freedom of religion and be tolerant of people's faith tradition, one word has dropped from our vocabulary, "heresy." Heresy of mind and heart is what I want to reflect on this morning.

I. HERESY OF MIND

In this scientifically complex, multiple-choice age, we rarely dwell on the established doctrinal foundations of our faith. Clergy can't draw enough people to form a class on theology but it is standing-room only for self-help seminars. Even less do we seriously entertain the notion of genuinely heretical views undermining the sanctity of those theological foundations. Opened-minded people are convinced that anyone who would propose that particular religious beliefs are heretical, is probably a fundamentalist or just out-of-step with modern thinking.

A. Certainly, no one would want to return to the days of old when you had to be careful what you proclaimed lest you be brought before an Inquisition. No one wants to return to the "good ole days" when church dogma had its hands around the neck of science and academic freedom. We do not want to relive the "dark ages" when the suffering the church inflicted on people in the fear of heresy resembled the work of organized crime and Sadam Hussein.

Nor do we wish to return to the days when the church officials forced Galileo to kneel before an Inquisition to deny the scientific evidence that supported the Copernican theory that the earth moves around the sun. In those days and now,

We all say that the truth will set us free, but when the view of life that has given us meaning appears in jeopardy, few of us find the faith to affirm that more life-enhancing view...(O, Conner, p.86)

Galileo findings did not contradict the gospel that "in Christ God was reconciling the world unto Himself."(II Cor. 5:19) He just called into question the Aristotelian mindset of the day.

B. In the Church's efforts to respect other faith traditions, even the heresies, we have sometimes ceased to stand up and proclaim our faith in God's love through Christ. We are reluctant to share our Christian faith or question someone else's' when they inform us they worship rocks. An example of this can be seen in a class I took on "ritual process and healing:"

In this class of some 25 theology students, there were students who were pagan and one who was the religious leader of a witchcraft group. The religious leader of the witchcraft group had a deep conviction concerning her beliefs and was angry because of the persecution from Christianity. She expressed this frustration by calling attention to our failures in history. After all, I think it was a group of Congregationalist that went on a witch hunt in Salem.

But this person's beliefs weren't the problem. It was the lack of expressed conviction among the Christians in the class. I have to confess that yours truly also said nothing to defend our actions or promote my faith.

Scripture says Christ was "obedient" to God. However, in our tolerance, we were not obedient.

In business, if a sales person marketing a particular product has no more belief in that product than we reflected, he or she will not make many sales. We enjoy affirming our cultural values more than our faith in God. When my family and I arrived in this northern territory a few years ago, we discovered that Yankees have hash browns for breakfast. But I still believe grits are better and I do proclaim that truth. John Cobb said that we "cannot continue to be Christians without believing that....Christ is supremely important."(p.19) Scripture says He "is the source of eternal salvation."(vs. 9)

II. HERESY OF HEART

Not only are there heresies of mind, but there are heresies of the heart springing up like dandelions in congregations. Recent studies by New York's Albert Einstein College of Medicine suggest that when the heart becomes severely diseased, the mind often follows. So too, with Christianity and the church. When the heart of the church is sick, the mind of the church gets perverted. When it is time to stand up and be counted, we have "amnesia." There are two heresies of the heart that we need to consider: "heresies of hope and heresies of love."

A. Heresies of hope can be summed up in the denial of God's promises. Jorgen Moltmann said that "the sin of unbelief is grounded in hopelessness. God promises a new creation of all things in righteousness and peace, but (we) act as if everything were as before."(p.22-3)

It is ironic that the hopeful words of Jeremiah were read as the priests of Judah found themselves standing in the rubble of the temple which had been burned to the ground. "I will make a new covenant....and all shall know me." For the Christian, this new covenant is the Good News that "in Christ God was reconciling the world unto himself."(II Cor. 5:19)

According to statistics, the average person speaks about 4800 words a day. (They haven't calculated how many words preachers speak.) Every day we hear and say things that are heresies to the Christian faith.

Nothing can be done about it.
You can't fight city hall.
You can't change the world.
GET REAL!
What's the use!
I can't make a difference.

Pastoral counselors interpret the word can't when it is used in a personal sense to mean that we won't. To say despairingly "I can't win" means "I won't win." For a church to say we can't complete a ministry just means we won't. That kind of despair is heresy.

B. The last heresy of the heart concerns the love of God and the love of each other.

1) Maybe the reason we don't stand up for our faith is that we have a sinking sensation that "God doesn't love me." Particularly is that true when we experience a crisis. This is the most difficult heresy to relinquish and the one most easily disproved: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." The problem is that we are so busy that we can't hear God saying "I love you."

It's like the couple who retired to Phoenix, Arizona and one morning the wife was busy keeping the appliances going. The husband looked up from his newspaper at his wife and began to have warm romantic feelings toward her. He expressed this with the words, "Dear, I am proud of you." With all the noise, she couldn't hear properly, so, she snapped back, "well, I'm tired of you, too." In the noise of life, we just can't hear God saying, "I love you and I am proud of you."

2) Another heresy of love is the estrangement ironically enough brought on by religious doctrine and church practices. None of us would want to go back to the days when ecumenical worship was non-existent. No one wants to return to the days when families became estranged because a child or a spouse became part of another Christian tradition.

Even today there continues to be estrangement as individuals work out there salvation in fear and trembling. Parents will not bless their child's wedding because it is in a religious tradition that is different. I have a friend who is serving a Southern Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. Churches are divided between the conservatives, fundamentalists and moderates. Now when friends see each other in public, they don't speak to each other. Sometimes, we Christians forget that one the highest principles of our faith is to "love our neighbor as ourselves."

It is the heresies of love and hope that will cause us to become spiritually sick.

CONCLUSION

In this age of pluralism, we have forgotten, or maybe we never learned how to stand up for what we believe in a spirit of love and care. Edmund Burke said that "nothing is fatal to religion as indifference." Love, hope and conviction of beliefs defuses this indifference, not an Inquisition.

I once heard a story of a little community of faith living in Russia during the time of Stalin. They had gathered together for worship one evening and, during the worship

service, some soldiers with weapons burst into their place of worship. The ranking officer announced that the worshipers had five minutes to vacate the premises or else they would be arrested and sent to prison.

After a long pause, many of the worshipers made a silent exit. Five minutes past and the majority of them stood their ground. The officer closed the door, instructed the other soldiers to put their weapons away and announced to the remaining faithful: "Now that the uncommitted have left, let's have a real worship service."

Would we have stood our ground, or would we have left? Amen.

Cobb, John B., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, The Westminster Press
Moltmann, Jurgin, *Theology of Hope*, Harper and Row, Pub.
O'Conner, Elizabeth, *Letter to Scattered Pilgrims*, Harper and Row, Pub.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Dear God, our cherished friend forever, may we fear you in the reverence of awe and love you as a child who deeply loves its parent.

Break us Lord, until in your wholeness, we are whole. Keep us from the dogma that poses as conviction but so often betrays your love. Keep us from a simplistic faith that thinks we have you on a yo-yo string. Save us from such a faith that wants you to do for us what we can do for ourselves. Yet help us to always be open to your guiding hand and the depths of the mystery of your being and the mystery of your grace. Keep us from deeds that pose as pure love but are contaminated by selfish ambition. Keep us from grandiose attitudes brought on by the pride of being Christian when we are in the presence of those whose religious views are different.

In your light Lord, may we see light. With a purer motive may we serve you; not to escape suffering or to gain heaven but because we love you for yourself alone. Trouble our souls until we can move beyond do-gooding to being truly Christian on the inside. Your love for us through Christ is a gift and it is a gift that we can share with our neighbors.

Christ has shown us that we are to be bread broken for the world even as He was broken. It is in being broken that we find redemption, for the pain of suffering causes us to seek you and reach out to others. It is reaching out to you and the sharing of our faith pilgrimage with others who also know brokenness, that we find wholeness.

Dear God, as we close this conversation with you, we do pray for peace in our world and in ourselves. As citizens of this nation, give us wisdom to choose leaders that will seek truth, justice and peace, that your kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven.

In our brokenness, we pray for wholeness and healing. Hear and answer our prayer. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.