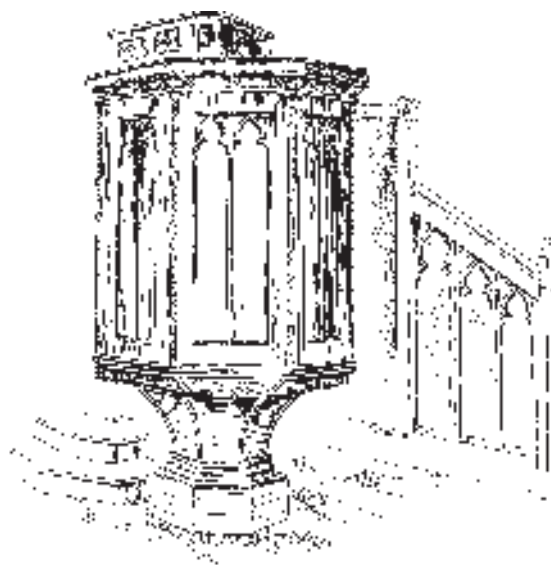


February 1, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Just Across the Rio Grande

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

2 Samuel 6:12-15
Revelation 3:14-22

As part of our *Investigating Church Membership* seminar, we ask perspective members to describe their most important church experience. It's a telling question, because church sociologists tell us that folks usually judge their current church on the basis of their most important church experience, even if it happened decades ago. So, if your most important church experience was in a 100-member church with 30 in worship, in a small, white, clapboard building, you might be daunted coming into this room on a Sunday morning. A church Westminster's size will never measure up to the family-feel of a 100-member church. Instead, we have our own strengths.

When we did that exercise last Sunday afternoon with the new members' class, I thought of the church from which I went to seminary. But, suddenly I found myself also thinking about another church. I was never a member there—just visited for a week. The church's name is Verdad y Luz—Truth and Light. It is located in Juarez, Mexico. Way back in 1989 I visited this church with six others from the Jamestown church I was serving. We were on a one-week mission trip to build a Sunday school room addition to their church building. While it occurred 20 years ago, the experience was so meaningful that I remember it as if it occurred last week. I'm going to tell you a little about it this morning.

Juarez is a Mexican border town just across the Rio Grande River from El Paso, Texas. Holly Dunn, one of my favorite country-western singers, has a song, which sums up my expectations of the kind of

situation I thought we would find in Juarez. If I were braver, I would sing it for you. But instead, I'll say you the song:

The lights of El Paso dance on the water and shine in a young man's eyes. He stands on the border and dreams of paradise. He's heard crazy stories of how people live over in the Promised Land. He heard they eat three meals a day just across the Rio Grande. He has a wife named Maria and a baby named Rose, another one to feed on the way. And two willing hands that couldn't find work today. He stares at the river and curses the future that he can't understand. He knows his child would have a chance just across the Rio Grande. It's only a river not so deep or wide. A boy could throw a stone across and reach the other side. It's just some muddy water cuttin' through the land. But, a man can make a dream come true just across the Rio Grande.

One of my initial surprises was just how puny the Rio Grande is. "The great river" is barely a creek—at least in the summer of 1989—the driest of the decade. The Stillwater River is several times deeper and wider than the Rio Grande we saw. As the singer says, "a boy could throw a stone across and reach the other side."

But, this tiny creek does separate two worlds. In Juarez, housing was so modest it was literally painful to look at: dry, dirty, dusty, pot-holed roads. The words "poverty" and "heat" were redefined for us. The days reached 107 degrees. We would stop work on our construction project about noon each day, when the nails became so hot that you couldn't comfortably pick them up even with gloves on.

Thinking of the man described in the song, I remember the first day wondering why the border problem—of Mexicans coming to stay in the US—was only numbered in the thousands. Why didn't all the more than a million people in Juarez come across?

We arrived late on a Tuesday night. On Wednesday evening we worshipped with their congregation for the first time. That's when I got a hint of an answer to my question. We were struck at the exuberance of their worship. Their 25 or 30 member congregation, for instance, would easily drown out our Westminster Choir in singing a hymn. There were no hymnals. They knew the songs by heart. I remember the woman standing beside me. She threw her head back and with her eyes closed sang from her heart as if her life depended on her song, as perhaps in some ways it did.

During the service we were asked through a translator to introduce ourselves and talk about our families. After we did that I was asked to say a few words to their congregation. I remember awkwardly saying how different we were—their heat—our snow, their dry summer—our wet June, their informal, no-bulletin service—our stiff orderly service, yet that we were united in Christ.

Now, 20 years later those differences—how we complement each other—stand out still. We went with our dollars, our college educations, our rented SUV, our construction expertise, our excellent health, our leadership, our results oriented agenda. None of which they had. We came to help them build a Sunday school room.

We came expecting to serve and to be brutally honest, we came expecting to pity these people; we left almost envying them. For you see, what we found in those people was a joy and a passion for God. We hadn't realized how truly impoverished we were. In their congregation I looked out on happy, contented, joyful eyes. Yes, they were dressed in T-shirts or other modest clothes, but they possessed true joy! I was very surprised. You see, I am used to looking out on well-dressed people, coats and

ties and fur coats, but people with lines on their foreheads and worries knotted in their brows. I saw none of that at “Verdad Y Luz.”

What I envied most was their obvious passion for God. We Presbyterians really are the “frozen chosen.” Sure, we permit a rise in blood pressure over some things, such as a change in pension benefits or rolling in a 20-foot putt or an Ohio State football win over Michigan. But when it comes to spiritual things, we sober up rather quickly. We Presbyterians are people who by and large make a generally “decent” commitment to a church as part of our well-regulated life. We take our religion, like our wine, in moderation to add an enriching, but not intoxicating dimension to our lives—all things, after all, done decently and in order. We’re the kind of people you’d like to have on your board or in your club or living next door. But isn’t there so much we’re missing? It’s almost like we have been vaccinated with Christianity so we don’t get the whole thing.

What I’m talking about is passion! The word “passion” comes from the Latin “passio” and the Greek “pascho.” Its root meaning is suffering. The passionate live so intensely in some areas of life it hurts. In a way, they lose themselves in the truth. We could even say they die to the truth. It’s as if the truth seizes them and carries them outside themselves; in this sense they become eccentric. Eugene Ormandy once so vigorously directed the Philadelphia Philharmonic that he threw his arm out of joint. He gave himself so completely to the truth of the music it maimed him. That’s passion.

Now, the good members of First Church Laodicea, of whom we read in our lesson from Revelation, were not into music enough to throw anyone’s spirit out of joint. They were citizens of a great city, one of the most prosperous in the Roman Empire. No doubt their wealth provided enough leisure to think about some of life’s mysteries. They must have found something helpful in Christianity, perhaps a spiritual dimension to add balance to their lives.

But the Lord of the church was not pleased with them. According to the apocalyptic vision recorded in the last book of Scripture, the resurrected Christ sent them a disturbing message: “Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:16).

Spit you out of my mouth? Why such harsh words? The church didn’t seem to be that bad. It wasn’t guilty, so far as we can tell from the text, of gross immorality or theological heresy. Perhaps its faith wasn’t red hot, but a lukewarm faith must surely be better than a cold faith, a feeble witness better than no witness. Why would Christ find the lack of passion so nauseating?

The answer, I believe, has to do with the character of God. God’s people, through their community life and worldly service, bear witness to God’s character. And the Bible testifies to a passionate God.

Is this why we see David, who Scripture calls “a man after God’s own heart,” during the most important political ceremony of his administration, stripping down to his skivvies and dancing in ecstasy before the people and most of all before the Lord? And is this why we see the son of David dancing in his own way through Galilee and Judea, filled with compassion for the people because first of all, he was filled with the passion of God? He suffered for the truth, died for the truth. We speak of his passion on the cross. And is this why we see Paul traipsing about the Roman Empire, somehow surviving being stoned and being shipwrecked, like a lovesick troubadour singing of his beloved? He almost seems—well, unbalanced, too obsessed with his own view of the truth.

No moderate religion for Paul—no lukewarm faith. He was filled with no mere idea of Christ's passion, but with the thing itself; Christ's passion had become *his* passion.

That passion had not expended itself by the end of the New Testament era. God's people have continued to be carried away by the truth. St. Augustine's passion still reaches across distant centuries and pierces our hearts. Martin Luther's passion pushed the German language beyond its known limits and literally reshaped it for generations. John Calvin's passion created arguments as sharp as his nose because he believed that what one thinks about God matters for all eternity. John Knox's passion sent him running out into the streets of Edinburgh with the cry, "O God, give me Scotland or I'll die!"

John Wesley's passion kept him traveling on horseback an average of 250 miles a day for 40 years, preaching 40,000 sermons and writing 400 books. Soren Kierkegaard's passion attempted to breathe life into the corpse of Scandinavian Christendom. Karl Barth's passion set theology on its head with every one of the seemingly endless pages of *The Church Dogmatics*. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s passion articulated both the pain of the oppressed and the justice of God. And the passion of the church at "Verdad Y Luz" in Juarez, Mexico had a lasting impression on seven members from the First Presbyterian Church of Jamestown, New York.

The last line of Holly Dunn's song is this: "Sometimes it seems like God must live just across the Rio Grande." That's what it seemed to me as we left Mexico, standing in El Paso looking *back* towards Juarez.

Donald McCullough, a Presbyterian minister living near San Diego, recalls the passion of his grandmother:

One day she stopped strumming the autoharp, looked me in the eye, and in hushed tones told me she had something to confess. What could grandmother have to confess? Did she fall asleep during last week's sermon? Did she let slip a "gee" or a "gosh"? "Donny Wayne," she said, looking over her shoulder to make sure no one overheard, "sometimes...I dance. I get so overwhelmed with the joy of it all...with God...that I cut loose. But don't worry. I shut the curtains."

Perhaps like the grandmother and our friends in Juarez, we need to cut loose—to let ourselves be ravished by the truth of it all, the joy of it all, the passion of it all.

I'm not suggesting a turn to emotional Pentecostalism nor frantic Fundamentalism. There's a big difference between emotionalism and passion. Emotionalism is only a second cousin to passion, and a poor relation at that. Emotionalism lives for feelings; it emerges from feelings and wants to re-create those feelings in others. Passion, on the other hand, lives for truth; it emerges from a perception of truth and wants to re-create that truth in others.

An emotional romantic, for example, loves the feelings aroused by another person while an authentically passionate romantic loves the other person and the feelings follow as a consequence. A passionate person is dedicated to something much bigger than his or her feelings about it.

In Juarez, we experienced a passion emerging from the love of God, a passion revealed concretely in the self-giving death of Jesus, a passion flowing from the sure presence of the Holy Spirit. This passion had a definite winsomeness about it.

What is the answer to lukewarm Christianity? I'm not sure. I wish I knew. But I am sure that the one who lived and now lives in the full being of God is ready to help. The resurrected Christ condemned the sisters and brothers at First Church, Laodicea; but he always, even in his judgment, offers grace and salvation. So he concluded his admonition with a promise: "Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in...(Rev. 3:19-20).

That's the promise. He will come in. And then begins the dance.

Let us pray-

O Lord, we know our priorities are turned upside-down. Help us to lose ourselves in your truth for we desire a passionate faith. Amen.