

June 27, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

A Living Dog or a Dead Lion

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Ecclesiastes 9:1-6

I remember the phone call even though it took place years ago - back when I was a youth minister in Pittsburgh. It was a surprising call – not something I expected. But, then as a youth minister, you learn to expect the unexpected. Amy Jackson, one of the fringe members of the Shady Side Presbyterian Church youth group was on the line asking if I would help with her 10th grade English project.

Her class was studying “wisdom literature” and the assignment was for students in groups of three to explain wisdom literature from one culture or source to the rest of the class. From Confirmation Class the year before, Amy remembered that there was wisdom literature in the Bible. Frankly, I was surprised Amy had remembered anything from Confirmation – let alone that there was wisdom literature in the Bible. But, she said she had. She and her friends, Buffy and Katie, had volunteered to interpret biblical wisdom literature to the rest of their English class. Now, she was on the phone asking for help.

I agreed to meet the three teenagers the next day after school. We began by reviewing different forms of literature, “Just as there are different forms or genres in a newspaper, there are different forms of literature in the Bible,” I told them. “For instance, a newspaper might have a front page article on the crisis in the Amazon rain forest. On the editorial page there might be a column criticizing the plan put forth by The Sierra Club and opposite that might be a cartoon lampooning the large multi-national corporations laying waste to the invaluable habitat. All of these deal with one issue – the Amazon rain forest – but by way of different literary forms – news, editorial, and cartoon.

"In a similar manner in the Bible, God's love for humankind and God's desire for us to return that love is communicated by different forms of literature: poetry, story, history, parable, letter and so on. One of those distinct forms is 'wisdom literature,' and one of the places where it is found is in the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament." I opened the Bible to the third chapter and read:

*For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:
A time to be born and a time to die;
A time to plant and a time to pluck what is planted;
A time to kill and a time to heal;
A time to break down and a time to build up;
A time to weep and a time to laugh.
A time to mourn and a time to dance. (Ecc. 3:1-4a)*

Amy, and Katie, who was a Roman Catholic, recognized the passage right away. Buffy, whose family didn't go to church, said she had never heard those words before. So, I took out the 8-track stereo recorder and when I played the Byrds' hit song "Turn, Turn, Turn," which quotes this passage in Ecclesiastes verbatim, even she realized she had listened to wisdom literature from the Bible without knowing what it was.

I explained to them that wisdom literature expressed the human quest for meaning in life, meaning for human existence – the concern of man as man and woman as woman. "The quest for wisdom is the philosopher's quest," I told them. In fact, "philosophy" literally means love of wisdom. Religious people are prone to settle down comfortably in their faith and have pat answers. But, books like Ecclesiastes demand to be talked back to. A believer wants to push back and dialogue with it.

"Show us what you mean," said Amy. I turned to the ninth chapter which we read earlier as our scripture lesson, and read the proverb, "A living dog is better than a dead lion." On a spring day after school, there I was trying to get three teenagers to understand wisdom literature in the Bible and asking them which they think is better, a dead lion or a living dog?

Buffy, whose family didn't attend church, said, "A living dog is better; it's better to be alive than dead any day."

That persuasion would win a lot of votes, I should think. Even when we are discouraged, all of us truly are in love with life. And our fear of death is legion – as a glance at any bookstore display will prove out. It's true even in sports. The goal of any Wimbledon or World Cup match player is to stay alive until the next round. The author of Ecclesiastes says it well, "The living at least know something...."

But, Katie, the Roman Catholic, disagreed. She said, "Oh, I don't know; to be a lion is better than to be a dog, and even a dead lion was once a living lion."

Well, there's something to be said for that point, too. Think of all those lions that died on the Normandy beaches 66 years ago this month. You can pay too dearly for the privilege of being alive. What if someone buys popularity at the expense of conscience, or wealth at the expense of honesty, or a place in the sun at the expense of honor? Isn't that paying too high a price? Wasn't it Gloria Steinem of all people who said, "Dying seems less sad than having lived too little"?

Do you remember Thomas Cranmer, the great leader of the English Reformation? When Thomas Cranmer was Archbishop of Canterbury, he was sentenced to die at the stake. But every day during his imprisonment in the Tower of London, he was offered life and liberty if only he would sign a paper renouncing what he was convinced to be the truth. Every morning with his plate of prison food, they brought the document in, with ink and pen beside it. Every day Cranmer resisted, for two and one-half years – 913 days. But life is sweet, and the longing to live is strong; and there came a day at last when Cranmer yielded, and he signed, and the death sentence was lifted.

Life was his again. Whew! But soon after that moment he began to feel a worse horror. A more terrible and inescapable threat hung over him – that he had gotten to live at the cost of his own honor – too high a price. He held himself in contempt. He hated what he had done. Life on those terms was intolerable, and he recanted what he had recanted. So they took him to burn at the stake. In fact, he was so angered by his own self-betrayal that he held the hand that had signed the confession – had signed seven of them, actually – into the fire until it was cinder. “Oh, this unworthy hand,” he cried.

Better to be a dead lion than a living dog; I’m sure Cranmer would have agreed. So too, would Martin Luther King, Jr. It was King who said, “A man who won’t die for something, is not fit to live.” And what about the Apostle Paul? Didn’t Paul say, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”? Paul knew that true living meant having parts of you die. The Christian dies to pride, dies to greed, dies to lust.

Yes, a Christian is to have the heart of the lion in living, and even the courage of the lion in death. Why else does the author of Revelation call Jesus the “Lion of Judah”?

But then Amy, the “sometimes” Presbyterian, interrupts my thoughts. Pragmatic, practical Amy – she says, “I’d rather be some of both – a lion like the one, and alive like the other.” Obviously, that would be best. But I wonder, can such a compromise be worked out?