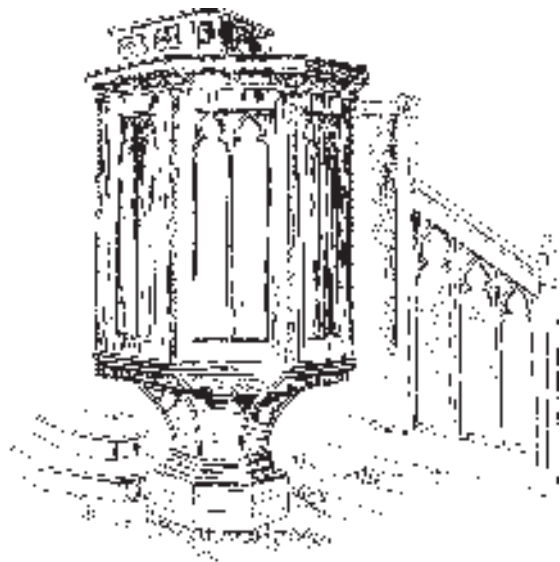


August 16, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Overhearing the Mystery
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

I Corinthians 13

While I was an Associate Minister in Pittsburgh, I flew to New Mexico to officiate at a wedding service for a member of the church. When I flew home, I overheard a conversation that I would like to share with you.

On boarding the plane to Albuquerque, I found myself assigned to an aisle seat. Sitting next to me was a gray-haired woman and next to her in the window seat was a young man of college age. Before taking off I noticed that the young man was reading his well-worn Bible. He wore a new t-shirt which said, "Campus Crusade for Christ." The older woman was studying the folder on emergency exits from the plane.

About two hours into the flight, the college student turned to the woman and said, "I've just had the greatest week of my life!" I pretended to continue to read my novel while listening to their conversation. "Oh, really," said the woman, "what happened?"

"I attended a leadership camp for the Campus Crusade for Christ," he responded, pointing to his t-shirt. "It was really fantastic. Campus Crusade is an international fellowship of Christian students. I got involved in it last semester where I go to school at The University of Massachusetts. It's really changed my life. During the summer, Campus Crusade has several training camps in New Mexico and

students come from all over the United States. When I get back to UMass in the fall, I'll help lead our fellowship."

"What made the week so special?" asked the woman.

"I'm not sure I can describe it," he replied. "I just really felt the love of Christ like I've never felt it before. Growing up, I went to church with my parents, but it never really meant much to me. When I got to college, I stopped going to church altogether. Then I found it! I met some of the folks in Crusade and committed my life to Christ—that changed everything. Have you heard of the four spiritual laws?"

"No, I don't think so," she responded.

Immediately, he took a little pamphlet from one of his pockets, and began..."Just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so there are spiritual laws which govern your relationship with God.

Law I is: That God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." In order to prove his point, he showed the woman John 3:16 in his red-letter Bible—"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." And then he turned to the tenth chapter and read Jesus' words, 'I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.' "So Law I," he said, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. But why is it that most people are not experiencing the abundant life?"

He didn't give her time to respond.

"Because (Law II) man is sinful and separated from God; therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life." Through passages from Romans he showed her where it says, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." And, "For the wages of sin is death," which he explained was a separation from God. He even drew a diagram depicting how a great gulf separates Holy God from sinful man—a gulf that through his own efforts man is unable to bridge.

He turned the page, not even stopping for a breath!

"The third law explains the only way to bridge this gulf," he continued. "Law III: Jesus Christ is God's *only* provision for man's sin. Through him, you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life." Again the college student ably illustrated his point through scripture: Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates his own love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." I Corinthians 15:3-6: "Christ died for our sins...He was buried...He was raised on the third day, according to the scriptures...He appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. After that he appeared to more than 500..." John 14:6: "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through me.' So God has bridged the gulf which separates us from him by sending his son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross in our place, to pay the penalty for our sins," he concluded. "But it's not enough just to know these three laws.

"Law IV states that we must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives." To illustrate he read from John: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." And from Revelation the words of Christ, "Behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him." So, he said, "You *must* pray for Christ to come into your life. Will you pray

that prayer with me right now?" Silence.

"No," responded the woman. I hadn't expected such a direct reply and the look on the student's face told me he hadn't either.

"What's the matter? Didn't I explain it well enough? Is there something you don't understand? A question I could answer?"

"No, I think I understand everything you told me. It was quite clear." Silence. Finally the student said, "Then I guess you **want** to remain separated from God—is that it?"

"Young man," she replied, "I've tried to be polite. I've listened to your Four Spiritual Laws, but I resent your attitude. Just because I hadn't heard of your 'Four Spiritual Laws' you assume I need to be saved. You don't know whether I am a Muslim, a Buddhist or an atheist or a Baptist or a Christian Scientist, or what. It just so happens that I've been a Presbyterian all my life, and besides that, I've been a missionary in India for the last 18 years." On hearing that my ears really perked up.

"Gosh, I'm sorry," he stammered. "I didn't realize. I guess I was a little over-excited with my experience this past week."

More silence. And then the missionary began to speak, "You know, what you said was good. It really was. In fact, it might be the best capsulated version of the Gospel I've ever heard. And yet something bothered me—not just your assumption that I needed to be saved—not just your not getting to know who I am and what I believe, it was something about your message—it was—it was—too good! Those Four Spiritual Laws are too neatly packaged; too cut and dried—they're silver certain, and Christian faith contains mystery and ambiguity. If the Gospel can be best represented in Four Spiritual Laws, why didn't Jesus do it that way? Instead, he taught in parables, with stories that left room for the mystery of faith.

"You know what I think?" she continued. "I think it's not so much that I know God or that I now know the four spiritual laws, but rather that God knows me. Paul says it somewhere in Galatians or Corinthians—I can't quite remember where—that it's not so much we know God, but through loving God and others we are known by God. Does that make any sense to you?"

"I don't know," he replied, "I guess I'm not sure I see your point. What's it mean to be known by God?"

"Well earlier, when referring to your conversion, you said, 'I found it.' Paul wouldn't say 'I found it.' I think Paul would say, 'God found me,' and not just once, God *keeps* finding me—*continues* to find me.

"You talk of Christian commitment as if it were something that has happened to you once and for all—like some kind of spiritual plastic surgery. I look at it this way: every morning you should wake up in your bed and ask yourself: 'Can I believe it all again today?' No, better still, don't ask that question until *after* you have read the morning paper, until *after* you have studied the daily record of the world's brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your Bible. Then ask yourself if you can trust in the Gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day. If your answer is **always** yes, you don't know what believing means."

"Now I understand what you're saying," the student answered. "But I don't think I agree with you. I need a faith I can believe in. I want to build my faith on rock, not sand. I'm not comfortable with

mystery.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong,” she replied, “I am not comfortable with mystery either. But Christianity is not a comfortable religion. Jesus is not a tame God. He....”

Just then the pilot interrupted the conversation to thank us for flying Braniff Airways. We had made it to Chicago on time. As I gathered my things in preparation to transfer to my flight for Pittsburgh, I heard the missionary say one last thing. “If you have to use ‘the Four Spiritual Laws,’ add a fifth—I Corinthians 13:12.”

Well, you might think I have memorized the New Testament; but, I haven’t. So, inconspicuously, I wrote the verse on the corner of my ticket and looked it up when I got home.

“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”