

## Are You Certain?

Do you ever wish sometimes that you could be more certain about things? The world, after all, can be an awfully ambiguous place. Some people of course, are very certain about everything. This is a condition most often found in the young. While Connie and I were at Taproot Theatre Friday night, chatting with friends after the show, my friend Terry Moore was telling me how absolutely sure his 18 year old son is about how much he knows and, conversely, how much his father, Terry, doesn't know. Terry quoted that old saying often attributed to Mark Twain, "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years." We laughed and agreed that there's something adorable about that level of teenaged certainty – it's quite endearing to those of us who look back and know better. We're much more aware of knowing what we don't know. It can be mildly embarrassing to look back over our own pasts and remember just how sure we were that we knew all about certain things. Charlie Scalise was telling me a story the other day about a young seminary student in one of his classes years ago who was absolutely, positively sure that he would never be a pastor. He was, of course, telling that story on me as well as to me. Funny how things work out, isn't it, Charlie?

Of course, some people never grow out of that teenaged certainty. These folks are absolutely convinced that they know all about whatever there is to know on any subject you'd care to name. This rock-solid assuredness about everything is somehow less winsome in those old enough to know better. I find it particularly prevalent and particularly galling in people who want everybody else to know that they have the inside track on the will of God, not just for their lives but for yours and everybody else's as well. I was reminded of this about two weeks ago when Pat Robertson issued another of his infamous "It's God's punishment" pronouncements, this time regarding the earthquake in Haiti. According to the Rev. Robertson, the earthquake was part of God's curse on the Haitians for having made a pact with the devil some 200 years ago. This is, of course, a follow-up to his similar judgments following 9/11 and every hurricane that's come close to the U.S. in recent years. I'm sure Rev. Pat finds great comfort in knowing the ways of God and nature so intimately. I'm less than convinced.

If you're wondering what this has to do with our Scriptures for the morning, the certainty with which Pat Robertson declares that he knows the will of God and how he seems so enthused about pointing out how God is out to get those with whom he, Pat Robertson, disagrees or doesn't like or doesn't understand, rather reminds me of our Gospel story this morning. I want to look at that story in relation to how we can become so certain that we understand what God has in mind for us that we can miss the true revelation when it comes along. I also want to dip into the Old Testament a bit, both in the stories to which Jesus refers and in the lectionary's Old Testament passage for the morning, to see if we can find models of more appropriate approaches to our knowledge of God and reality. Finally, we'll return to our reading from I Corinthians, which reminds us, in part, not to be too sure we've got it all down and to be open to the truth we hear from others.

I hope you recognized our reading from Luke this morning of the second half of a story in which we usually focus more on the first half. This is Luke's telling of the Sabbath early in the ministry of Jesus when he went to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and delivered what some have called his mission statement. Reading from a scroll of the Book of Isaiah, he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the

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poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." We usually remember those words and what he said next, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," which is appropriate because this passage is the very heart of the Good News. But we often forget, or rather neglect to remember or review, what the reaction of Jesus' hometown audience was. At first they spoke well of him but they were "amazed" by his words and their reaction soon turned to rage so great that they attempted to throw him off a cliff and stone him. From our vantage point of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Lynnwood after two millennia of Christianity, we are left confused. What on earth happened to make Jesus' neighbors turn on him so violently? What did he say?

Some of my recent reading, particularly in Kenneth Bailey's fine book, Jesus Through Middle-Eastern Eyes, has provided me with a possible answer to the question and it's not just about what Jesus said. It's also about what he didn't say. Let's think for a moment about the situation that morning in the synagogue. Jesus is speaking in Nazareth, a town in Galilee. At that time, Galilee was probably best known for being a hotbed of revolutionary fervor. The observant Jewish residents hated the fact that so many foreigners had been moved in by centuries of conquerors that their district was now known by many as "Galilee of the Gentiles." Small revolts against the Romans had risen and been put down again and again. The punishment for anyone even suspected of being a revolutionary was death by crucifixion and the Romans were not shy about applying it. The folks in that Nazareth synagogue had been living with the tension of living under a harsh and hostile regime for generations. They longed for God's intervention to redress the wrongs done to them. They longed for the Messiah to deliver them. So when Jesus began to quote the prophecy of Isaiah, they would have been right with him. "Yes, Jesus, preach it, boy! We need the good news, we need release from oppression!" But Jesus didn't give it to them quite the way they expected.

You see, Jesus didn't quote the whole passage from Isaiah. Here's Isaiah 61:1-2 in its entirety: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn..." In the deep anger of the Galileans over all their years of oppression, the idea of God's vengeance on their oppressors was just as important to them as was their own freedom. They were absolutely certain that when the good times came for them, it would mean bad times for their enemies. After all, it was in the Scripture! And those Romans deserved it! When Jesus spoke, he spoke "gracious words" indeed – his word of grace made no allowance for vengeance. Of course it amazed them – they couldn't imagine one without the other. They were certain it had to happen that way.

What he said next would have further flown in the face of their certainty about what God had in store for them. Perhaps they'd already begun to ask Jesus when he was going to start performing healing miracles in their town or perhaps he only knew that they would. But not only does he tell them, in essence, to forget it, that he's not going to play by their rules but he further offends their sensibilities by reminding them of two stories of some of Israel's greatest prophets. Not only does he refuse to talk about God's vengeance on the Gentiles they hate, he reminds them that their own God in the past has actually blessed Gentiles over God's own people. When all of Israel was suffering a famine because of drought, God sent Elijah to miraculously feed not a poor

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Jewish widow but a Gentile, the widow of Zarephath in Sidon. And Elisha, Elijah's successor, never cured a Jewish leper by the power of God but he did cure Naaman, general of the Syrian army and archenemy of Israel.

Even though Jesus was quoting from what must have been one of their favorite Scriptures, even though he was simply telling them stories of God's mercy that they must have known since their childhoods, they couldn't hear what he was saying to them. His interpretation was too radical; they were too sure they knew already what God was about. Confronted with gracious words that contradicted their iron-clad assumptions, they grew angry, murderously so. To come into the Nazareth synagogue and preach a God whose love for their enemies they could not recognize was blasphemy and the penalty for blasphemy was death. There was no Roman garrison in the obscure little town of Nazareth to stay their hands as there was in Jerusalem, so they led Jesus off to put him to death in the traditional way. The great Tennessee preacher and professor Fred Craddock writes of those villagers, "anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth embedded in their own tradition."

I don't really think it was by supernatural means that Jesus escaped that day. I don't know if any of you watch the USA Network's cable series "Burn Notice" but Connie and I have watched it faithfully since its beginning, mostly because a kid who worked for me as a stage carpenter twenty years ago was first the art director and is now the production designer for the series. The series is about the adventures of a former CIA agent, Michael Weston, who now helps people in trouble in his hometown of Miami. Last week, Michael bluffed his way out of a dangerous situation simply by looking a group of thugs in the eyes and snapping his fingers. Well, it helped that his friends had high explosives, but I digress. I think Jesus let his former neighbors get him to that hilltop and then turned around and looked each of them in the eye. And, one by one, they were unable to meet his gaze and backed off and let him go his way.

Had they been able to hear what Jesus was saying to them, I think there was another level of meaning to his choice of stories. Not only was he telling them not to be so sure that they were in and the Gentiles were out in God's eyes, he was also telling them not to be so darn sure they had God and God's world all figured out in general. You see, in both of those stories, the story of Elijah and the widow in I Kings and the story of Elisha and Naaman in II Kings, God doesn't fully bless the widow or the general until they are confronted with what they think they are certain of and learn to move beyond it. In the Elijah story, the prophet has been sent by God to Sidon during the great drought. He comes upon a widow and her son who are on the brink of starvation but share what little they have with him. God blesses them with an unending supply of meal and oil but the boy sickens and dies. The widow is sure that God has punished her. She cries out to Elijah in her anger and grief, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" But God has sent the prophet to bless and not to curse. Elijah convinces the widow to give him the boy's body, prays to God to restore the boy to life and so it is. "So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.'" God's will is for mercy and not for judgment but the widow has been certain that judgment is what has come upon her. In the Elisha story, General Naaman is convinced by his Hebrew slave girl to go to the prophet for healing from his leprosy. When Elisha will not even see him but directs him to dip himself in the Jordan, the general is offended. "'Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of

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Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage." But the general's servants convince him to set aside his certainty about the world and to listen to the prophet. And when he does as Elisha says, Naaman is healed. If only the people of Nazareth had been willing to set aside their certainty and listen to Jesus, as the Gentiles were willing to listen to God's prophets before, what miracles might he have wrought among those he knew and loved?

The humility to which Jesus is calling the people of Nazareth and which is reached by the Gentile subjects of his sermon illustration is evident from the beginning for another servant of God. The Revised Common Lectionary lists as today's Old Testament reading a pericope from the beginning of the Book of Jeremiah, the story of his calling. "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." I like the fact that one of Israel's greatest prophets started his career uncertain that he could fulfill God's calling. It's an emotion I'm familiar with. That younger version of me who told Charlie Scalise in such certain terms that he'd never be a pastor was, at least in part, scared to death that God was calling him to do just that. I think God was gracious to me in giving me two decades to prepare myself to finally do what God intended for me all along. But I can assure you, I do not sit down to write, or stand up to pray or to preach, or come to see you in the hospital or sit with you in the office or over coffee to hear the concerns of your hearts without first praying, "God, be with me because I can only do this with you." If I was as certain of what I am doing now as I was when I was in my twenties that I'd never be doing it, then I'd be worried about myself.

I guess I've been convicted by the truth of what Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth. Love "does not insist on its own way... For we know only in part... now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." I think the old hymn is right, we *will* understand it better, by and by, but for our time here on Earth it is important that we know how much we don't know. The Quaker sociologist and theologian Parker Palmer writes, "At the heart of any authentic religious experience is recognition that God's nature is too huge, God's movement too deep, ever to be comprehended by a single conception or point of view....God's truth is singular and eternal, but the forms in which we give it expression are as finite and fragile as clay pots, and we must always be ready to break them open on behalf of a larger vision of truth." The good people of Nazareth were ready to defend their "clay pot" by lynching a man who'd grown up among them, one whom Luke tells us had spent his childhood in that little town "increas(ing) in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man," one about whom they'd spoken well of just minutes earlier.

The calling of God upon us this morning, expressed in the sermon of Jesus and the letter of Paul, is to be ready to lay aside what we think we are certain of in favor of a holy ambiguity. Let us

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not be so certain that we know what God wants that we miss the movement of grace among those whom we consider outsiders, the enemy, even our oppressors, if we have any. One of my heroes in the faith is an old Southern Baptist preacher and writer named Will Campbell. Will Campbell made his reputation in the Fifties and Sixties by being one of the few White clergymen who marched with the Civil Rights Movement, alongside Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the rest. But he fell out of favor with many of his civil rights compatriots when he wrote such statements as “anyone who is not as concerned with the immortal soul of the dispossessor as he is with the suffering of the dispossessed is being something less than Christian” and “Mr. Jesus died for the bigots as well,” and when he initiated a close friendship with a leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Will Campbell is not afraid to demonstrate the love of God for the Gentiles, whoever they may be. When we are most in disagreement with someone is when we need to work at loving them the most. I’ve got to remember to hold Pat Robertson in love, bless his heart.

Our “clay pots,” which we are so sure hold all truth, will break and crumble in time. Prophecies and theologies will come to an end as the circumstances of future generations render them obsolete and obscure. The holy gifts of our liturgy and hymns and styles of worship that we find so critical for our contact with God in worship will pass away as new generations require new windows into the infinite from their very different world. We should not be too certain in our theology or our practice – they are devised by human beings and like all human things, they will be lost in time. But love never ends. So let us resolve to live our lives in love, with patience and kindness and forgiveness, not being so certain that our way is right but open to hearing new truths in places where we least expect them. Our God is like that and our God is love. “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know only in part; then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”