

David W. Lloyd: Preaching the Word

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In the lectionary Gospel for last Sunday, Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah,

The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me;

He has sent me to announce good news to the poor,

To proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind;

To let the broken victims go free,

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The lectionary Gospel for last Sunday ended with Jesus claiming, "Today, in your very hearing this text has come true." He had no doubt that the Spirit had rested upon him. Would any Seeker who preaches here say, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me?" Probably the most that any Seeker would say is, "I felt called to preach," or maybe, "I felt called to preach **the** Word," but probably not, "I felt called to preach the Word." Seekers has an open pulpit just as the synagogue in Nazareth did. The liturgist usually explains that the Seekers Church follows this practice because we believe that God's Word may come through any of us. I want to emphasize the word "may." Nevertheless, several weeks ago when Dan Phillips was serving as liturgist, he said that we have an open pulpit because we believe that God's Word comes through each of us in turn. That caught me by surprise. Do we all believe that God's Word comes through each member of Seekers Church **in turn** when that person preaches? What do we do when we do not believe that the sermon we just heard was God's Word?

Jesus' statement from last week, that "Today, in your very hearing this text has come true," is repeated as the opening line of the Gospel for this Sunday. The next line says that the congregation was respectful and full of admiration. Of all the times I have heard this scripture and read this scripture, I never truly heard before that the congregation admired Jesus. So I checked this passage in several other translations of the Bible, and to my surprise, in each one it is clear that the congregation admired Jesus.

Then Jesus went on to pick a quarrel. He enraged the congregation by saying that they will demand that he perform miracles in Nazareth as he had at Capernaum, but that they will not honor him as a prophet. Jesus went on to say that he would be treated like Elijah the greatest of the prophets, and like Elijah's disciple Elisha. When their fellow Jews did not believe their prophecies, they did their miracles for the Syrians, the Jews' enemies. In saying this, Jesus was really insulting the congregation. In one moment, he undid their admiration and turned them against him.

Why did Jesus pick this quarrel? Perhaps he sensed that while they admired him, they were also skeptical. Perhaps he had to cut the tie to his home to be truly free to pursue his ministry. On the other hand, perhaps this episode did not really happen in Jesus' life. Maybe it was Luke's way of telegraphing to the reader that Jesus' ministry and resurrection will ultimately end in rejection by his people, the Jews. Maybe it was Luke's way of signaling to us that the Gentiles will accept Jesus' ministry and resurrection, which is the primary subject of the Book of Acts, also written by Luke. I must confess that I really do not know why Jesus did

this.

The question in front of the townspeople of Nazareth that Sabbath was: "Who is Jesus? Do we really know him? He grew up here among us! And he is getting such a reputation as a teacher and healer." However, when Jesus' words became offensive, they had other questions. "Are you saying we don't get your message? Are you saying that we do not have faith? Are you saying that you will do more for others, including our enemies, than you will do for those who put up with you when you were a kid? This isn't the word of God, this is outrageous."

We have the same questions that they did, "Who is Jesus? Do we really know him?" Two weeks ago, I came across something I just had to buy: the Jesus Action Figure, with poseable arms and gliding action. This is what it says on the back of the packaging:

The name Jesus means, "God saves." The term Christ is a title for "Anointed of God." For Muslims and some Jews, Jesus was a prophet. Buddhists say he was enlightened. Hindus call him an avatar (the incarnation of a deity in human form), and Christians hail him as the Son of God. So who was he?

Jesus was an extraordinary healer. Nearly a quarter of the Gospels describe his powers over sickness. To the downtrodden, he taught restraint and charity in the face of oppression. As a result, the powerless learned to maintain dignity without being arrogant. He delivered this message to the people: "The time has arrived for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. If you believe in this Good News, then it will happen."

He was executed at a young age as a common criminal. Since then, he has been the topic of many heated theological debates. Although he is understood in many different ways,

everyone seems to agree that he was a remarkable man.

The last two sentences strike me as a bit wishy-washy, sort of like saying, "some say this and some say that, but as for me, I say that some say this and some say that." Because of not wanting to offend anyone, the company that produces the Jesus Action Figure does not really tell us who Jesus is.

Seekers like to talk about the Seekers Church as a community and to talk about the way we go about building community. At least every third year we encounter St. Paul's discussion of how each person in the Church is like a part of the body, that no organ is better than another, that the eye needs the foot, etc. When we hear this story of the uproar in the Nazareth synagogue, we think, wow, imagine that much conflict! A Christian congregation would not act like that. A Christian congregation should not act like that. Yet, Christian congregations have conflicts all the time. This is not a new thing. Read St. Paul's letters to the churches in the New Testament; many of those letters are addressed to conflicts in the congregations. Seekers Church frequently has conflicts. Sometimes we acknowledge them but sometimes we do not.

Why do we have conflicts in Seekers Church? It is because each person is different, and experiences the world differently. We say that we recognize this and value these differences just as we value the different spiritual gifts each of us brings to the community, and frequently, maybe even usually, we do value these differences. But not always. Let us be honest. Seekers is primarily made up of people who hold relatively liberal views on spiritual issues. How do we react when we hear someone voice a conservative view on those spiritual issues? Do we prayerfully consider that view? Do we give thanks that we see things differently, and that we are enriched by these

differences? On the other hand, if you tend to hold conservative views on those spiritual issues, and you hear someone express a liberal view, do you silently repeat President Reagan's comment, "There you go again?"

Let me give you some examples that trouble me of how I sometimes handle differences of opinion, or sometimes fail to acknowledge that there are such differences. The same things may trouble you, or maybe you have different ones.

Occasionally I receive an e-mail message from someone in Seekers that contains some statement or opinion that I do not agree with. Do I value this disagreement and give thanks that we disagree? No way! I think that the sender needs to know that I disagree. Actually, to be truthful, I am really thinking that the sender needs to know that he or she is wrong and I am right. Now I can send a response back, call that person or bring up the issue during the coffee hour. However, I usually do not. It is too much trouble to compose the response and then have to edit it so it does not inflame him or her. Phoning is not satisfactory, since it takes too much time to phone the person, and there is no eye contact or body language. I usually have too many people to see during coffee hour. Therefore, I do not respond. The other person may have no idea that I disagree with him or her.

Another example: sometimes during confessional prayer, someone confesses his or her anger at the latest outrage, _____, – and you can fill in the blanks – that President ____ – and you can fill in the blanks – has done. If I think that the latest thing the President did was not only not outrageous but also even good for the country, what am I to do? Am I to pray silently, "Dear Lord, your wisdom is greater than mine and greater than the wisdom the last person who prayed. Forgive

their anger?" or am I to silently pray, "Dear Lord, I confess my anger at what I just heard," or am I to silently pray something else? Feel free to help me out here. I think I sometimes pray, "Dear Lord, forgive their anger, and forgive their ignorance in failing to see that the action the President (or the Congress) took was right."

How about this – Occasionally, amid all the rushed announcements during our circle time, someone makes an announcement about a public issue urging us all to take some action. Do we hold off on other announcements to take the time to find out how many people agree with the issue as it is presented? Do we propose a time to discuss fully the pros and cons of the issue? Do we take the time to discuss a position that everyone could agree with? If it is the first time that the issue is presented and we are urged to take action, but I do not agree with either the issue or the proposed action, I feel myself getting angry. Now, I do not like beginning my worship in an angry mood. I believe it would strengthen our relationships if we took the time to allow people to get fully informed on an issue, and to check out the levels of understanding and agreement first, before we urged action. Maybe we could even find some position and action we all agreed with.

How about conflict over the preached Word? Except on communion Sunday, such as today, we have a period for responses to the preacher. When Seekers first began this practice, people sometimes expressed disagreement with what had been said, and discussions continued upstairs in the PC&CC office. I can remember an intense argument during worship on one particular Sunday. Nevertheless, over the last few years it has been rare for anyone – well, except for me – to express significant disagreement with a particular sermon. Not long ago, someone

took me to task during the coffee hour for disagreeing with the preacher, for criticizing the sermon. In looking back over how I had expressed myself, it was right for this person to chastise me for how I expressed an alternative view of the scripture. I came across as knowing **the** approach to the scriptural text instead of suggesting an alternative approach to it.

What if the preached word is critical of us as Seekers? Our [guidelines for preaching](#) include the style of prophetic confrontation, so long as the goal is to engage with us as a community and help us be on our journey. Several years ago, I preached a sermon about the role and function of the Church that was somewhat critical of Seekers. There were a few comments of mild disagreement. Then at our Learners and Teachers mission group meeting I really got an earful from the others, including criticism from someone who hadn't even heard the sermon, about the things I had said that were critical of Seekers. Again, I admit that I could have phrased things a little differently, but one of the messages I took from this experience was that the preacher should not be critical of our community.

I am pleased that we are working on how to communicate across differences. We have had [two classes on nonviolent communication](#) led by Jean Marcus and the other members of the Peace Witness group. The last session will be this Tuesday night. I do not know everyone's reasons for taking the class. My own reasons were very selfish – I wanted the rest of you to improve your communication skills so that my views could be received with the respect that they deserve.

The class members have provided some examples of violent

communication, and I occasionally squirmed as I recognized examples of my own violent communication in someone else's example. We were making progress in finding alternatives to making negative moral judgments about others' actions or opinions until someone asked, "But what if you are right and the other person is wrong?" We laughed, but I know that sometime I feel that I am right and the other person is wrong! Moreover, I want to communicate that! Therefore, I have a lot of work to do in learning this better form of communication and practicing it. I am not sure I can do it. For me to communicate in the way that this class teaching us will be truly living in faith. In my opinion, we need at least six more classes, or at least I do, and then periodic refresher classes, somewhat like booster shots to retain our immunity from violent communication. On the other hand, maybe we need lifelong classes in learning to love one another.

The Church has a history of violent communication. In a few minutes, we will celebrate Jesus' last meal with his disciples. From the 13th century on, the Roman Catholic Church has believed that the bread and wine metaphysically change to become the body and blood of Christ. This is called "transubstantiation," meaning changed substance. In the 16th century, Martin Luther taught that the bread and wine remained bread and wine but that Christ's body and blood were also present. This is called "consubstantiation," meaning with the substance. Alternatively, the Anabaptists taught that the bread and wine merely remained bread and wine, merely symbols of Christ's presence. We are an ecumenical congregation and these differences may not be very meaningful to us today, and yet, for several hundred years, the Catholic Church persecuted tens of thousands of Christians who saw the Lord's Supper differently, and thousands of Protestants did the same toward Catholics. Then in 1618, the Catholic Church allied itself to the armies of the Holy Roman Emperor and kings and the

Protestants allied themselves to the armies of kings and princes. In what is now Germany millions of people died in more than 30 years of religious civil war, in part because they could not resolve their differences over Jesus' last meal. Sharon and I saw visible evidence of the destruction of the Thirty Years War even 350 years later when we were in Germany last December.

To the question, "Who is Jesus?" Christians reply, "Jesus is the Son of God." We can come to know Jesus because God opens our hearts. We have just finished celebrating the liturgical season of Christmas, the festival of the Incarnation of God into human form in Jesus. From the perspective of the Incarnation, Christmas and this sacrament are not just about Jesus' body. They are really about God taking action to reclaim us to be who we are intended to be, free from the power of death by giving himself to us and for us. When we eat the bread and drink from the cup, we are acknowledging the Incarnation in a way that is far deeper than celebrating Christmas. We prodigal sons and daughters should make it a joyous celebration of thanksgiving that our forgiving father has forgiven us and welcomed us back home as full members of the family. Indeed, the word Eucharist means gratitude. Moreover, having been forgiven by God, we can live in a commitment to love each other totally, with no holding back, forgiving each other, accepting our differences, expending ourselves for others and deriving our growth and freedom through that.

We can also come to know who Jesus is by understanding his ministry. We look at his humanity, at the way he encountered people, giving the poor and powerless dignity and worth, claiming no home or comfort for himself. We see that he gave himself to others so totally that eventually he was willing to die rather than to stop living the Good News of God's love to the poor, proclaiming to the captives that they will be

released, that the blind will see, and that people broken by life will have their oppression ended.

If we come at Jesus' last meal from the perspective of his ministry, it is about inclusion. Jesus' body is being given to us as a group and for us as a group so that we become Jesus' body. When we share the bread and drink from the same cup, we are acknowledging that there is a place for all of us with all of our differences, young and old, women and men, rich and poor, black and white, conservative and liberal. It is a joyous communion as we are gathered off the streets and alleys and invited to a banquet where we can contribute ourselves. Indeed, the meaning of the word "communion" is mutual participation. Joined to each other by a mutual commitment to follow this teacher and healer, we can live in a commitment to love each other totally, with no holding back, accepting our differences, expending ourselves for others and deriving our growth and freedom through that.

So let us not be too quick to condemn the synagogue at Nazareth for the conflict after Jesus' preaching. Moreover, let us not be too hard on ourselves as Seekers for our acknowledged and unacknowledged conflicts, either. Let us learn to love each other, to accept that we are unique, and therefore different, and all are part of the body of Christ.