

A FAREWELL SERMON  
CROSS WISE AND FAITHFUL

*Philippians 2: 1-13*

Sunday, October 31, 2010

The theme we are going to strike is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It's about the One obedient to the cross, and faithful. It's kind of odd, isn't it? — every Christmas, the stable renders up its treasure, every Good Friday, they follow through with the crucifixion, every Easter, Life absolute spurns the grave. And every Sunday, we open for this business. It looks the same yesterday, today, and always. Is it?

When I was young, we had perhaps a hundred record albums, a treasure of symphonies and musicals and jazz and poems and speeches of John Kennedy. We listened a lot. An odd fact struck me even then, though: recordings of the spoken word got no more play after their first days in the house. Once you'd heard an album of speech, it seemed you knew it and nothing would come of hearing again that string of ideas. But music is never a string of ideas you remember. It is more like water or food. You need it. After an interval, you gladly take the same again, though you do not gladly suffer hearing the same instructions twice.

Maybe most of those who've left some church are just tired from having the same instructions speeched at them. Maybe their preachers don't understand that, just like their choirs, they too must make music. They must not "read from the recipe book," as Krister Stendahl once put it, but "serve the food!" Our intention here always is to serve food. An elder once said to me, "Sermons are something like the meals my mother made. I hardly remember any, though some bad, but the many made my life possible." The gospel is like that. It sounds or looks the same yesterday, today, and always. But like the music you need, like the foods you must have, the gospel is never just the same—because you, O child of God, are never twice the same. Come and partake with me one time more from the word that has no end but God.

It starts like this: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who . . . did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself in the form of a slave . . . and humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue confess him Lord."

Here in this short hymn we encounter the whole enigma of our life before God. When we hear about the kneeling, some part of us refuses and stumbles, muttering, *You're not the boss of me!* We wanted to stand on our own, thank you very much, but this song of hope that all might find reason in kneeling offends us. What to do? Let the Bible read you, I like to say, not you it. If you are quiet to observe how the hair-trigger needles of your self fly about as the ancient words are spoken, you can learn your own terrain in the dark. It is a great discovery, like finding the south pole, to feel, like a cosmic sibling rivalry, some trouble in the words, *Therefore God exalted him with the name that is above every name.* We cannot help but notice that between stumbling to the ground and kneeling there, only one is a free act.

Or was it? Some other part of us has too often swiftly slipped into the sloth of inferiority, quick to say, *I can't—I'm just a—I'll never be—I am what I am—I tried so hard—I can't change—She makes me feel . . .* You name it! Some part of us is so ready to be lost amid our sorrows and failings and to stay there on the floor of things, unhappy, taking our solace in Jesus who forgives it all, we say; or in politics, which could fix it all, we say (if only the bad guys are tossed out); or in some substance which will dull it all, we're sure. What—religion as narcotic? Revolution as narcotic? You betcha!

But the apostle has a word for us quite different both for that part of us which refuses to kneel and

that part which desperately craves to be saved by something. *Work out your own salvation*, he says. How? *In fear and trembling*, he says. Awed and inspired by the mystery and grace of being—yours and all things’—yet never self-sure, trust that *it is God who is at work in you*, he says. How can I trust like that? How can I live like that—taking always the low seat, loving my every neighbor, loving my enemy, letting go, forgiving seventy times seven each day, struggling no more to save my life, my pride, or my knees, but giving up? Can I live that life?

You cannot. This too is part of the Christian good news. It is rather: *You* cannot, for the gospel comes cross wise, with the up side down. *You* cannot, but you are not your own. You are not alone. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*, writes Paul. Will you take him at his word? In the gift of God, see that there is but one mind, one consciousness in and through all things. In the gift of God, we have seen the mind of God at work in Jesus Christ and have at times felt wakened from our slumbers in the seeing. And when we wake, we must put something on. *Put on the mind of Christ*. Late in this very letter to the Philippians, Paul, all awake, will say, “In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (Phil 4:12-13)

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*. This comes cross wise. For the mind that was in Christ was willing to be weak—was fully able to be disabled—was in no haste for heaven or earth. In the summer before we met, I offered a sermon at the Lafayette Presbyterian Church here in Brooklyn for a few of you, come to taste the wares. “In Jesus,” I said then, “you see no desperate striving to finish, no concern to know the right people, no anxiety to orchestrate the right politics, no climb up any ladder but the cross. He did not finish best in show. Not best philosopher, not best orator, not best doctor. So far as the world knew, not best man, but a common criminal.” And though it was not our text that day, I added, with the apostle that “he counted equality with God not a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, and took the form of a slave . . .” This comes cross wise, but this gift—this mind—is also for you. The sign that you are receiving this gift—that you are on real life support and it is working—is when you feel that your humblings freely chosen are the same as your being lifted up; that your kneeling is your standing; that crucifixion and resurrection are together one reality, not two, the one seen only in time, the other in eternity.

We all know that Beethoven was deaf when he composed the Ninth Symphony. He wrote that for him, the Ninth was a single music, a single event, a single chord almost—so beautiful that he must communicate it. It was the need to communicate that required the expression in time we know as the symphony; it takes an hour or so. Crucifixion-resurrection is like that. It is God’s eternal sound, the perfect chord. But God must communicate it. So God, who so loves the world, requires its expression in time and history. It takes three days or so to say it, cross wise and faithful.

Thus do we live in the mind of Christ. And note this well. In the mind of Christ, Jesus did not look to religion for consolations. Our portrait of him reveals no clinging to theories about what is so which might not be so. Such theories belong to faith’s weak form. Jesus’ faith did not consist of such beliefs, but rather only of faith absolute—an edgeless trust in God in all things which enabled him to live in courage, without frail consolations. This is faith’s strong form—and yours from God for the asking, to experience unity in light and dark, in life and death, in humbling and exaltation, as you work out your own salvation, confident that it is God who is at work in you.

This cross wise mind of Christ shows up for all the world in what I would call the fare well spirit, given to all who ask for it. All justice depends upon this mind, and all compassion. Compassion bears the fare well spirit, able in its every sinew to let go so that God may dwell more surely in the beloved. Years and years ago, my brother noticed that his baby girl, who begged for his two fingers to clutch in tiny fists to help her walk, did not, after some days, actually lean upon the everlasting fingers. Yet

without them, she fell always. He cut two finger-shaped cylinders of plastic and high above her head, inserted them in the asking hands. And she walked well, without him. Fare well, little one. All love from God in the mind of Christ is like that. From its silent depths, all divine love is ever ready to say *Fare well, my beloved*.

And all justice is so ready, too. This church has been forged in the spirit of justice. All its leaders and all its blessed people yearn for justice to roll down like mighty waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Yet justice is aborted if those who clamor for it want too much their own success. They have no fare well spirit. But your life together, and your minds, are forged in the fire that brought new power to us through our prophet Martin. He had the fare well spirit. "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

Oh! the mind of Christ is alive. In the tragic history of the beleaguered people of this nation and of every nation, all true justice has been bought only with that fare well spirit which in the gift of God is not worried about anything, and can therefore do anything, all things, through Christ who strengthens us. That spirit touches all things with justice because she is ready to relinquish power at any instant to serve and to nourish and to strengthen others. Any politics not fired by the fare well flame is, in Yeats' words, just "a beggar upon horseback lash[ing] a beggar on foot." Beware of this world. And ask humbly, that the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

I must leave you now, in the flame of fare well. You are my beloved friends. You have loved me well. I have loved you well. Compassion and justice are running through here, an ever flowing stream. So, although In human terms alone, it is hard to say good bye, perhaps you can imagine how glad I am for you, and how glad to have served you, and how literally every day I have given thanks for you all this year, and how every day of my life left will be nourished and fed by the song we have sung, cross wise and faithful.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have often listened to me, not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

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Brooklyn, New York*