

Emory Church  
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“When the Gospel Becomes an *Irritating Word*”

*“When we have eaten our own words until we are sick of them, when nothing we can tell ourselves makes a dent in our hunger, when we are prepared to surrender the very Word that brought us into being in hopes of hearing it spoken again-then, at last, we are ready to worship God.”*

*Johann Christoph Arnold*

If the TV preachers have got it right, (and based on the common American notion of success, they do), I can't understand why anybody wouldn't want to be a Christian. Because if God has a wonderful plan for your life and wants to shower you with blessings and give you your heart's desire, and all you have to do is believe that he loves you and died for you, you can have it all. Health, wealth, and happiness, it's all yours for the believing.

If the truth be known, such a what's-in-it-for-me religion has saturated the Church like a big turkey dinner, leaving all of us lethargic and drowsy on our spiritual beds.

Listen to one prominent preacher of the day who wrote:

*“I'm enjoying God these days. He answers my prayer. He empowers me. He gives me insights from his Word. He guides my life. He gives me loving relationships. He has wonderful things in store for me.”*

I my me me me....and as the preacher goes, so goes the people...

To the point that faith becomes whatever I want it to mean for me, as explained by one of the killers of the DeKalb County Sheriff Elect, “Before we shot him, we gathered in a circle, held hands and prayed that God would help us be successful in what we were about to do.”

Or even closer to home, when one devout couple explained to me about the expensive home they had just built, “Well, the Lord helped us sell our old house for so much more than it was worth so we felt like it was his will for us to just go ahead and pay more for this one than we had planned.”

When we were young and talked like that folks would say we were pampered, even and spoiled rotten. But somehow in the Church these days such language has been baptized and catered to and even indulged in. Instead of what can I give we want to know what we can get out of this thing called faith. Church has become our family chapel. And the preacher our valet with God as the Indulgent Lover who cannot say No to us.

But I don't believe that the TV preachers have it right. And I think the rest of us are just teetering on the edge of what Jesus had in mind when he said, “Follow me.”

In fact, I really cannot imagine anyone deliberately choosing to follow Christ. Such a choice is so far from any natural desire or inclinations we have to preserve our precious little lives that I am amazed that anyone would give it a serious thought, least of all me. There are no guarantees in this life except suffering (just ask the first disciples) and at the center of the entire Christian experience, and certainly in the front of most Christian church sanctuaries, is the ultimate symbol of man's inhumanity to man: a cross. Who in their right mind would deliberately plunge an infant child in the baptismal font of such suffering on an otherwise beautiful Sunday morning?

Answer: Those who know that it's a kingdom coming, not a democracy, and that the only right we have in that kingdom is the right to obey and to serve.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem, that first Palm Sunday, the TV preachers gave him a hero's welcome but all he could do was cry. They waved and shouted and sang songs, and his response was to go into their Holiest Place and create havoc among their telethon operators. They thought all the Bible prophecies were coming true at last, and Jesus agreed, but the stories he had particularly in mind were the dark ones, the strange ones, the songs of lament that don't do well on prime time.

Sing us a happy song, they said. And sing them a song he did. One of their own. One they knew by heart. Right out of Isaiah 5:1-15 along with a theme verse from Psalm 118. But it was not a happy song. It was a song of the vineyard, the vineyard of the LORD, which is Israel and Jerusalem, the vineyard that should have produced sweet, tasty grapes but instead produced wild, tasteless grapes. The old Isaiah Song ends abruptly: God comes to the vineyard looking for justice, but instead found bloodshed; for right living but instead heard only the cries of the poor and the oppressed. In the Hebrew it's a pun: jokes instead of justice, garbage instead of banquet, Through Isaiah's Vineyard song, we began to understand why God could no longer withhold judgment from his own people: they were greedy and proud, experts in food and drink, but ignorant of God and his ways. So the vineyard would be left to go wild, to do its own thing, to let the hedges go to pot, and the vines wither away, to reap the results of its own chosen way.

And this is the song that Jesus plays to the big-steeped preachers of his day, but this time, he adds a new twist to the story. It isn't just that God has come to the vineyard looking for good grapes. He has sent messengers to get them, and they've been ignored, ill-treated, stone and even killed. So finally, he sends his Son supposing that they will respect him. Jesus edits this story because one week out from his own crucifixion, he sees the story of Israel coming to its head, its true climax. It is Jesus Himself who is the last great prophet, coming to the vineyard to persuade the sharecroppers to give his Father his due. Under no illusions of the outcome, Jesus finishes the story with a bloody end. The sharecroppers throw the boy out and kill him, thinking that the Inheritance Laws would negate the claim of any absentee landlord, giving them as the current tenants complete legal right to the land.

Jesus then asks a question of his listeners: "What will the vineyard owner do?" And his listeners know the answer; he will come and take the vineyard away from the resentful,

violent renters and give it to others. Then the “Aha” moment breaks in as Jesus asks, “Have you never read in the scriptures the stone that the builders rejected as become the cornerstone, this was the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes? Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces and when it falls on anyone it will crush him.”

Someone ( I think it was Flannery O’Connor) once said, “Religion is about a harsh and dreadful love.” So it is with this story and any story of Christian faith. God has sent us plenty of servants to remind us that we are not owners but renters, not landlords but stewards, not kings but subjects, or as the Apostle Paul said, slaves. But such news doesn’t set well with us. We want to bury it in hidden places on Sunday mornings. We want “happy” at all costs when we worship.

Yet the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reports it this way: “Some were tortured, refusing to accept release... others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. (11:35-37)

We don’t hear that on the old time Gospel hour. And if the truth be known we probably don’t hear it that much on Sunday morning in most churches across the land. It’s just not a pew-filler.

Yet this God, this Landlord, this King, refuses to back off from even the most greedy and arrogant among us. This God sends God’s own son, unarmed, into the dangerous territory of our enflamed passions and planned rebellions, and offers us yet another chance to get things right, to pay what we owe, to cover our debt and to live in obedience with the One who has so graciously set us down in this Garden of Life to till and to enjoy.

What we do with such a Son becomes, in itself, the defining moment of our lives.

Paul understood such a defining moment. As far as he was concerned, once Christ had captured his imagination, everything he had been in the past, everything he had accomplished, religious or otherwise, suddenly had little meaning. It was all dung as far as he was concerned. Why? Because to actually know this Christ in a living, transformational ongoing encounter changed his entire value system, his entire world. Seized by this Christ, Paul could not be the same... would not be the same because he didn’t/ couldn’t speak or act or think as if his work was his alone. He was a captive of Jesus Christ. Unlike many traditional approaches to evangelistic preaching, which offers the gospel as the answer to problems in people’s lives, Paul understands the Gospel to be just the opposite. It gave him no answers to his problems, but instead it disturbed his answers and sent him in search of a new “solution”, a new understanding that would always require radical reassessment of past, present and future. Or as that dear old preacher, William Sloan Coffin, former pastor of the Riverside Church in NYC, would say, “The Bible answers all your questions then questions all your answers.”

People of Emory Church, we know that this parable still comes around to irritate us 2000 years later. It comes to create a holy restlessness in our pews and in our lives that we so deeply try to smother and ignore, especially when such a restlessness threatens our comfort and our peace. It comes expecting us to give the Owner his due, to produce the fruit he expects of us, simply because it is what we owe the Giver.

I don't know what that means for you, as a Church or as individuals because the Spirit blows where it will. But I do know that Life in Christ is not based on an ideal or a principle, but on the very presence of the Spirit of God among us.

I recently returned from Europe and was intrigued by the Holy Spirit holes, round openings to the sky, high in the domes of several ancient churches. Some were surrounded by painted flames. Others simply hovered there, silently, awaiting the in-breaking of the Spirit when the Spirit chose to move.

I wish we had such an architectural feature in our churches today. I need to be reminded in very concrete way, weekly, that we are more than a group of sincere, well-meaning, friendly individuals. We are the miracle of Pentecost, intended by God to be fire, life, restless and united in its longings for the kingdom of God. We are not intended to hover on these pews and pray only for parking places and money to pay the bills each month. We are called to produce the same evidence Jesus himself offered when John the Baptist, imprisoned and anxious, asked him, "Are you the one or should we look for another?" And Jesus replied, "Go and tell John that the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor finally have some good news!"

That's a mighty big order for you me to back up two thousand years later. I don't know about you, but I'm not sure I'm up to the miracle business. Thank God, it's not about us. It's about *God* at work *as God chooses* through us, around us, and with us. That's why the Kingdom daringly calls you and to move beyond the aches and pains, the needs and wants of our own precious little selves to consider the conditions of life around us—that's when a new thing breaks in among us- that's when the Bible comes alive to us—that's when we begin to see and to hear the Kingdom coming all around us.

In the early days of the Church, everyone knew when that when the Messiah came, they would be changed. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and all the others said with the Kingdom's advent things would be different: wars would end, famine and pestilence would become a thing of the past, enmity between humanity and the rest of creation would disappear.

Obviously, we're not there yet. But that doesn't mean we need to spiritualize this Kingdom and make things all about "me." This Kingdom has, indeed, come — is, indeed, coming, — and is best seen in the lives of Messiah people who have welcomed the Spirit into their lives.

How will we know if we are those Messiah people? When we're producing the fruit of the Kingdom. When our churches, and, yes, our lives, are passionately consumed with the transforming work of justice, righteousness and saving peace, in Jesus' name.

No doubt, such a decision will, at times, irritate us, and, at other times, cost us dearly. But then again, we have a great Lord who has already shown us how to live well and to die well, for goodness' sake.

What about you? You know, we owe Him something. And the truth is, he asks only for that which is rightfully His. Amazingly enough, he comes to us, without fanfare or intimidation. His approach is kind and gentle, yet firm.

The Son is here.

What will we give him?