

A Sermon for Lent 3, Year C.
March 11, 2007
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The Church: Conservative and Liberal.

Today's gospel presents us with a snippet of a conversation between Jesus and some other people. I won't try to replay it, because you've just heard it. But what is going on, in that conversation, is a dialogue between people who embrace differing theological world-views. On the one side are those guys who see God as a deity who punishes sinners; and who punishes them right away. On the other side is Jesus, who instead suggests that it is in the character of God to give sinners another chance to see if they can turn their lives around.

The current experiences between The Episcopal Church and the leaders of certain other Anglican provinces, I think, clearly demonstrates that competing theological world-views are still in place within the Church today. In her reflections on the recent gathering of Anglican primates in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, our Presiding Bishop described the tension between the two sides in these words:

“Both parties hold positions that can be defended by appeal to our Anglican sources of authority – scripture, tradition, and reason – but each finds it very difficult to understand and embrace the other.”

The simplest way to define these two positions is to describe one side as holding the liberal position, while the other holds the conservative position. And the temptation for each is to believe that both cannot be right; someone has to be wrong. But as I see it, the church cannot really be the church – it cannot be the authentic Body of Christ – unless both sides are present.

Liberals need conservatives to keep their feet on the ground. And conservatives need liberals to keep them from becoming too comfortable in their faith. Both are needed in the church, and both reflect a side of the personality of Christ. For example, Jesus was being theologically liberal when he said:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Matthew 5:38-39)

However, Jesus was being a theological conservative when some Pharisees questioned him about divorce, and he held to the traditional view:

“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’?”

So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matthew 19:4-6)

I think the Church needs both her conservative members and her liberal members. When things are going well, they supplement each other, they compliment each other, and, given the chance, I believe they will discover that their ultimate aims are the same. In fact, I believe that a congregation that is exclusively liberal or conservative is out of balance and cannot fully reflect the mind of Christ.

Let me give you an example of how conservatives and liberals can argue the same point, but get to it by different paths. And as my example, I'll use the story of the virgin birth. A liberal approach to the virgin birth might look like this: Matthew and Luke, wanting to express their believe that Jesus is a singular person, in whom is seen the light and love of God as in no other person, can only (or best) describe this by framing the story of his birth within a narrative of a miraculous birth. A conservative approach to the virgin birth might look something like this: When Jesus was born, his mother was still a virgin, just as Matthew and Luke describe it. And what this tells us about Jesus is that he was a singular person, the son of God, whose life uniquely reveals the light and love of God.

We could do the same thing with the account of the resurrection – really, with probably any of the miracle stories in the gospel. Conservatives and liberals may travel different theological paths, but their aim and goals are usually the same. Certainly, it can get uncomfortable when liberals and conservatives go toe to toe, but who said religion and faith are supposed to be comfortable? Certainly not Jesus. We need to be part of a community where we are free to disagree with others, and they with us. We need to be part of a community that enables us to wrestle with our faith, to come to clearer understandings of why we believe what we do, and prepare us to share our faith with others.

I think history has shown us that when Christian communities are comprised only of people who are in total theological agreement, they are vulnerable to schism. After all, if the reason you're sticking together is because you agree with one another, what happens when someone comes along whose arguments are more persuasive, or better articulated? What happens? Communities split, and people go their separate ways. No Christian community can always agree on everything, and relationships should never be based on that. But if their unity is based on mutual respect, understanding, and love, that community can stand against any disagreements. Think about Jesus in the same room with tax collectors and Pharisees; it's hard to imagine theological world-views that could be any more different, but what does Jesus do with them all? He shares a meal with them.

The fact that the church is deeply divided along doctrinal and theological lines – and probably always has been – should show us that human intellect and common consensus can never be the source of unity. If anything, history has shown us that thinking too much, and too little, have done more to push us apart than almost anything else you can think of. Christian

unity begins in the heart; in relationships; in agape love. When these things are at the core of our unity, all else becomes less important.

God already tried the “intellectual” route, sending us ten laws written in stone for us to read, interpret, and enact. And apparently that plan failed; community cannot be commanded. So, God sent Jesus, a living, breathing, human being to show us that true community can only be learned by example, and achieved through interdependence and self-sacrifice.

[Note: This sermon really isn't finished. But I decided to post what I had.]