

The Need for Cultural Healing The Gospel in a Sign

August 23, 2020

Cultural healing is deeper than political healing, though are sometimes bound together. This healing has to do with moral values, habits of the heart, what we used to call mores, that is, social norms, customs and behavior.

I first started hearing about the “culture wars” in the 1970’s. They have only gotten worse since. It is a clash of competing moral values and mores.

Paul says in Philippians “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The Greek word for “manner of life” was *Politeusthe*, from which we get the word politics. But the word goes deeper than politics. It has to do with how we relate to other in the city, *polis*, in the community. This sermon is about the manner of life that fits the gospel of Jesus.

Under the leadership of John Kopplemeyer and the GIFT committee we are engaged in a sign project to encourage people to put up a sign in their yard and encourage others to do so. The sign says:

We Believe

Black Lives Matter

Love is Love

Feminism Is For Everyone

No Human Being Is Illegal

Science Is Real

and

Be Kind To All

As the GIFT committee discussed the sign and placing one on the church lawn, someone suggested putting beside it the popular sign you may have seen on lawn: Thank You Jesus! I like this idea because the two together transcend some of the battle lines of the

culture wars. But more importantly it suggests that what we sat “We Believe” is connected to our following of Jesus. It’s like beside the sign we put another that says, We Are Trying to Follow Jesus Here.

This is what today’s sermon is about: connecting what is on the sign with the gospel we are trying to live out here at Grace. So, here’s is my “sermon on the Sign”, not “Mount”, but sign.

II

We begin with Black Lives Matter. We are facing a time of racial reckoning in our nation and community as we face the centuries of systemic racism and racial inequity which has been devastating to people of color to this day. When only Some Lives Matter, God’s people stand up and say, yes, Black Lives Matter too. All lives, cannot matter if some people’s don’t. During the time of Hitler there were a minority of Christians and churches who at great risk to their lives and livelihood said: Jewish Lives Matter.

I've heard on social media and from some of our highest leaders that the Black Lives Matter is 1) Communist 2) Fascist; and 3) A terrorist group. This is not true. What is true is that large social movements draw people with different political philosophies and goals. I am sure that there are within the Black Lives Matter movement people who would disagree as to philosophy and goals. But the overall goal of the movement is to lift up the lives and the dignity of the lives of black persons when people of color suffer greater harm, danger and discrimination in this nation. Jesus stood for such lives in his ministry.

One more word. Sometimes the Holy Spirit goes outside the church to inspire movements in line with God's purposes in the world, justice, compassion, human dignity, peace. And the church too often lags far behind. Sometimes the Spirit is more alive in the streets than in the churches. So, at the top of the sign we say, Black Lives Matter.

Next, Love is Love. The church loves to say, “God loves everybody, and so do we!” But the proof is in the pudding. The church has spent a lot of time through the years defining “all” so it doesn’t really mean “all”. Jesus extended the definition of the neighbor we are to love until all are in the circle. It still makes us nervous. As Barbara Brown Taylor quipped, The ALL ARE WELCOME signs churches put on their buildings have the truth-in-advertising value of the signs in supermarkets that say, “Vine Ripe Tomatoes”.

When Myers Park Baptist was kicked out of the North Carolina (Southern) Baptist Convention because of our full welcome to LGBT persons, it not only made front page news of the Charlotte Observer, it went around the globe as a news story. I have in my files hundreds of letters as emails from people who said how important it was for them to read of our acceptance of LGBT persons. There was story after story of people telling me how they had been excluded and shamed all their lives in church—and that

we, a Baptist church of all churches, would do so was healing and encouraging.

So we say, Love is Love, no qualifications. We say, God loves all, and we mean all. Period. And we do this because as I John says, “God first loved us”.

IV

Next, Feminism Is For Everyone. Feminism has been a hot button issue in the culture wars for decades. The phrase echoes a title of an important book by bell hooks, introducing feminism called *Feminism is for Everybody*. In it she defines feminism: “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression.” It takes on many forms and causes. It is important to have this on the sign because we have seen such a backlash against feminism these days. It is doubly important because, as the sign says, feminism is for the healing of all people and relationships.

In his own first-century way, Jesus was a feminist. He elevated the dignity and status of women. He called women to be in his closest circle of disciples. The Church which followed even to this day have failed to live up to him on this.

We are celebrating this week the 100th anniversary of women's right to vote. We would do well to re-examine how fierce, even violent, the opposition was to women's suffrage—and how the church for the most part lagged behind.

So we join others to oppose patriarchal domination in church and society, as well as all the forms of misogyny that express hatred toward women.

In the Shaker Village in Kentucky Sue and I visited we were surprised and inspired by the belief of the 19th century community that there was absolute spiritual equality between men and women. Both partake of the divine image. So the leadership circle of every Shaker community is comprised of an equal number of women and

men. Only then could they discern the mind of God for the community. In fact, if a Shaker community became so small there were no women left, the community dissolved for both were required to lead the community.

V

Next, No Human Being is Illegal. This is first a spiritual premise, but our laws do well to approximate it. We put it on the sign because our nation is in an ugly anti-immigrant mood, not for the first time in our nation's history—it has come in waves—but today it has turned especially vicious and violent.

The most oft-repeated command in the Hebrew scriptures, found all throughout, is the command to care for “the widow, the orphan and the stranger (or foreigner).” And why? Because the Jews knew what it felt like! So in Exodus 23:9 we read

You shall not oppress a stranger; You knew the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Jesus echoed it in his parable of the Last Judgement. We will be tested in the end, he said by how we have treated the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, prisoners, and yes, the *stranger*. How you treat these is how you treat me. In other words, *he waits for us in them*.

Today our immigration law and policies are harming many immigrants and working *against* their becoming “legal”. Comprehensive immigration reform is buried in the bowels of Congress—and has been for 20 years. So, on our sign we say, No Human Being Is Illegal.

VI

Next, Science Is Real. I wish we didn't have to put this on the sign, but today the discrediting and dis-regarding of medical science is costing the lives of thousand of Americans. It is denying climate science about our planet. Sadly, many who are at the front of the line are Christians.

The history of the relationship of the church and science has been checkered. Sometimes they have worked collaboratively but often as antagonists. When Galileo was declared a heretic for his scientific findings that the earth moved around the sun, not vice-versa, the issue was Biblical literalism vs. scientific investigation. Today, we unfortunately we seem to be re-entering a period of antagonism between some forms of Christianity and science.

When I was teaching at Johnson C. Smith the President asked me to work on a project. A new Science Building was about to be finished. Beside it is the University Chapel. He wanted me to research some quotes that emphasized the cooperation between religion and science in the search for truth. They would be chiseled onto stones along the path from the Chapel to the Science Building. I came up with ten. Unfortunately, the project never came to fruition, but I loved the research. Here were two, the first from astronomer Johannes Kepler:

I was merely thinking God's thought after him. Since we astronomers are priests of the highest God in regard to the book of nature, it befits us to be thoughtful, not of the glory of our own minds, but rather, above all else, the glory of God.

And this one by Francis Bacon which appeared opposite the title page of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*:

Let no man...think or maintain that a man can be too well studied in the book of God's word or in the book of God's works...but rather let men endeavor on endless progress or proficiency in both.

We should clearly say: All truth that is truth comes from God, and we should explore it wherever it leads without fear.

VII

And the last, but far from least: Be Kind To All. We can be gloriously, passionately, heroically engaged in the issues of this sign, but without love we are, as Paul said, "sounding brass and

clanging cymbal”. The Bible calls us to hate what is evil and love what is good. But they need to be joined. As William Sloane Coffin quipped:

To love the good without hating what is evil is sheer sentimentality. To hate what is evil without loving what is good just makes you damned good haters.

John Lewis and Martin Luther King Jr., showed us how to resist what is evil with love in their non-violent resistance to systemic racism and unjust laws. They sought to follow Jesus in the love of enemy. Theirs was an extraordinary witness to the power of love.

So we close with Be Kind To All.

When I was in elementary school every Sunday afternoon about 3 pm I had to come in from play, change clothes and go to church for what was called Memory Work. We memorized Bible verses along with their references. I did not always go gladly, but it

has served me well in the long run. One of the verses I remember most vividly was:

Be ye kind, one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another. Ephesians 4:32!

Later I would learn the last phrase of the verse: "...as God in Christ has forgiven you." It is the kindness of God that makes us kind. And it is kindness that makes all the noble things we pursue not only right but also good.

Conclusion

That's the gospel in a sign. It may raise some eyebrows and bring some questions. The gospel often startles. If it starts some real conversation across cultural lines, it may help us all toward cultural healing. Let it be.