

Pushing the Boundaries

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, January 31, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 1:4-10; I Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The day following Haiti's devastating earthquake, televangelist Pat Robertson said on CBN (the Christian Broadcast Network) that this disaster occurred because the poor nation made a pact with the devil some 200 years ago. Robertson stated that when the Haitian people revolted against years of slavery as a French colony, one of their leaders made such a pact so the people would win independence. Haiti was declared a free republic in 1804, after rebelling against the French, who themselves, ironically, were embroiled in a revolutionary struggle for freedom. That story of the pact with the devil is most likely mere story, but Robertson's use of it was his lead-in to this statement: "Ever since, they (the Haitians) have been cursed by one thing after another." The implication being that cataclysmic events such as this are to be understood as God's judgment on unrepentant people. Robertson sees this tragedy serving as a "wake-up" call for Haiti to "turn to God." (Never mind the fact that an overwhelming percentage of Haitians are devout Roman Catholics!) Robertson has made similar comments before, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina, suggesting that these events somehow represent God's judgment.

Oh, to be so certain about what is contained in the vast and holy mind of God! But is it certainty or is it arrogance?

I do not doubt that Pat Robertson strives to walk faithfully as a Christian. But I still must respond to his comments about Haiti with St. Paul's words to the Corinthians that we hear today: *And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.* See, the Corinthian congregation to which Paul writes manifested all kinds of spiritual gifts, but the members had become increasingly arrogant regarding those gifts. So, in our second lesson, Paul reminds the young Christian congregation that speaking in tongues, or possessing divine knowledge, or prophesying with power is great, but all those abilities ultimately are trumped by love. In fact, love is the only way through which any of those others gifts can be faithfully exercised. When love is at the center of who we are as a faith community, then all those other gifts can be rightly celebrated and employed.

Like Pat Robertson, you and I ought not presume to be so certain what is contained in the vast and holy mind of God. But we do listen to Jesus' words and look to his actions found in scripture, and this much is certain about the Son of God: Consistently, Jesus spoke less about God's judgment and more about God's grace. Jesus did not spend his time setting up elaborate systems to keep God's love and mercy in, so that only a chosen few could access God's grace. Jesus spent his time

and spent his life breaking down barriers and letting open the floodgates of God's compassion and care to people who were way outside the boundaries you and I usually set. When Jesus did speak judgment, it was rendered against those who refused to love their neighbor—and Jesus always identified as our neighbors those we would never suspect.

Jesus pushes the boundaries in our Gospel lesson today, and his own people in Nazareth react—negatively. Now, not at first. In fact, as Luke tells about Jesus preaching in the synagogue in the town where he was raised, we learn that at first the people are amazed at what Jesus says. They think well of this hometown boy-done-good. Maybe that's the problem. He's the hometown boy. He's **theirs**. He belongs to us, they think. *Is not this Joseph's son?* There is pride in the identification they feel with Jesus, the carpenter's son they knew since he was knee-high to a grasshopper. Pride, yes, but pride turned to arrogance. Perhaps they are thinking: Jesus will fulfill the scriptures in our hearing...**for us!** We know all about God's promises to our people, and now Jesus will make them be a reality for us! And Jesus senses their sense of entitlement, suggesting aloud he knows they want him to do some of those miracles for them that he's been doing among the Gentiles, the non-Jews, over there in Capernaum.

The people of Nazareth are certain they know what is in the vast and holy mind of God. But, in actuality, they do not know how far God intends to push the boundaries of his kingdom and his grace. So Jesus tells them. He tells his neighbors that God's promises are reaching out beyond the boundaries of Judaism and God's original chosen people—the good news through Jesus Christ will be proclaimed and delivered to people living on the margins, to those considered outsiders. This is not really a new message. He reminds them of the prophet Elijah who, with God's power, provided food for a poor widow from Zarephath—Gentile territory. Jesus reminds them of the prophet Elisha who cleansed the Syrian army commander, Naaman, of his leprosy. The widow and Naaman were outsiders by virtue of their geography and physical circumstance, yet experienced the fullness of God's love and mercy. Again, this was not a **new** message. But it was a message the people of Nazareth didn't want to hear from their hometown boy who was supposed to tend to **them**. So certain were they that they knew God's mind, they couldn't stand to listen to Jesus tell them otherwise, and they nearly drive Jesus off a cliff in self-righteous anger.

Back in 1987, when I was interviewed for my first call to a church, the council there was asking me a variety of questions. One specific question gave me pause. Someone asked, "And what do you think about interracial marriage?" Well, my first thought was, "What hornet's nest am I walking into here?" Why would someone ask me such a question? Was there someone in the congregation—someone on council even—who felt strongly that interracial marriage was just plain wrong? Was this congregation filled with prejudice and bigotry? I had no knowledge about where this question originated.

I took a deep breath and said something like this: "I see nothing wrong with interracial marriage, but I also know such marriages have particular struggles, and

I would want to help that couple and support that couple as they face those struggles.”

Turns out the congregation had members who were an interracial couple. Clyde sang in the choir. His wife Jean was active on several committees. Their church family loved them, cared about them, and had welcomed them into that community of faith. Their church family had already bestowed God’s grace upon this couple with its friendship and support. The council member who asked me my thoughts just wanted to make sure that, should I become their pastor, I would be on the same page with them—that I, too, would push the boundaries of God’s grace outward to welcome Clyde and Jean, who in that town and that county were still considered outsiders.

Back in 1987 in that particular town and county, it was interracial marriage. But every generation since civilization began has had its own “poster child” person or group that the inner circle has chosen to exclude, boundaries firmly in place. Even the Church, in its history, has had occasions where it set up systems to keep God’s love and mercy in, so that only a chosen few could access God’s grace. The Church belongs to us! God’s promises are only for us! As if Jesus Christ was a thing, a possession to withhold from others. The outsiders have been legion—from unwed mothers to gay persons and their life partners, from those who are unbaptized to the newly divorced, from immigrants here in our country to poor people of other cultures in other lands such as Haiti, from those incarcerated in prison to the mentally ill and disabled. And even if the Church didn’t knowingly exclude them, it often didn’t know how to **minister to** them. The Church was manifesting all kinds of spiritual gifts for service in God’s name, but maybe what was most needed in these instances was love.

What does St. Paul say in our 2nd lesson? *For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.* It seems to me that, though you and I cannot possibly know what is in the vast and holy mind of God this side of heaven, and ought not be arrogant in presuming that we do know, you and I can still learn enough from God’s Son, Jesus Christ—we can learn enough from Jesus about God’s gracious intentions and peaceable kingdom. You and I can learn enough to walk in this world, pushing the boundaries outward so that the love and mercy of God can be received by those neighbors God has placed within our reach. **AMEN.**