

### “Costly Love”

A minister once asked a little girl, “Do you go to Sunday School? She replied with a bright smile, “O yes, every Sunday.” The minister then asked, “Do you know the Bible?” Again she smiled and said, “Of course I do. I know *everything* that’s in it.” “Indeed,” the minister said with considerable surprise. “Tell me then ... what all is in the Bible.” She promptly replied, “Well, there’s a lock of my hair cut off when I was a baby; mom’s recipe for banana cake; sister’s snapshots of her boy friends, and the pawnshop ticket for my dad’s watch. That’s *everything* in our Bible.”

Sometimes the Bible is a safe-deposit box or a dust bunny catcher rather than the word of God; a word that the lesson from Hebrews describes as “... living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 10:12).

Commenting on this particular passage, one author writes, “There is a (Roman) Catholic church where an enormous painting, high as a house, fills the chancel wall. It is a picture of the risen, victorious Jesus Christ. Perhaps the artist was trying to illustrate a verse from Revelation, because he painted Christ, Alpha and Omega, with an oversized two-edged sword coming from his mouth. The sword points down so that, if you are seated in that church, it seems to be pointing directly at you.” Then he goes on to comment, “Who are we who gather Sunday after Sunday in church buildings? We are people addressed by the sharp, two-edged word of Christ.”

In our own sanctuary, we have these symbols displayed in two of our stained glass windows. The Alpha and Omega, the symbols meaning the first and the last, you can see on the left backside of the wall of the church, and the two-edged sword is located on the right backside of the church. They stand opposite each other, which I believe well illustrates the author’s point. The Risen Christ, who is the first and the last, is the Word made flesh, the living and active word that upon hearing can pierce the hardest of hearts and “is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Another commentator pondering over this familiar verse suggests that the two-edged sword might more accurately be called a scalpel. Perhaps the writer of Hebrews had in mind a surgical tool rather than a weapon. It makes better sense when we think the word of God is like a scalpel ... a small straight thin-bladed knife used especially in surgery. Hopefully, the scriptures throughout our lives speak to us in a corrective way when necessary. When we think about it, over time, various lessons from the Bible have spoken to us, confronted us, and operated on our current situation. We may feel poked by one passage and probed by another; pricked by this one and gutted by that one. However, the underlying assumption is that meditation upon the scriptures can be a healing experience.

Unfortunately, though, there are human voices claiming to be people of God ... people who use the sword of scripture as a weapon rather than a healing tool. They interpret the word of God in a vindictive way, dismissing any Christian who does not believe as they do. They attack and attack with Bible verse after Bible verse that prove their particular narrow points of view. One listens in vain for some word of grace echoing God’s forgiveness or God’s love that heals, but hears only the stabbing voice of vindictiveness. Some witnesses of the Christian faith use scripture to wound ... not to heal.

I believe the word of God operates in this way: let’s say you have a “tumor” of hate within you. It enlarges and endangers your health, if not your spiritual life as well. Then one day while reading or hearing a parable, like the Prodigal Son, you open your heart and the corrective surgery removes the “tumor” of hate, and from that moment on you begin “to get well”.

Take another “for instance:” you may suffer from a broken relationship ... you’re hurting and want pity. You seek the relief of solace and talk to anyone who will listen about how you were wronged by this other person .... Be they a spouse, a business partner, a long-time neighbor, or a friend. However, over time you discover there is no real comfort in the situation. Radical surgery is needed. Perhaps by coincidence (*God’s presence is found in the coincidences of our lives*) you read or hear a scripture lesson that pertains to loving even those who wrongfully, despitefully hurt you. The impact is one of relief ... relief in a way that you have never known. The scar remains, but the open wound begins to heal. Perhaps the word of God comes to you, not only through the Bible, but also through the counsel of another or through a study group or thorough a sermon. The words may cut deeply ... the truth may be quite painful. But when the gospel ... the good news ... is accepted as a necessary healing word ... you will begin to get well. As one author writes, “Thank God for our scriptural scars.”

Someone has compared the Word of God with the effect that a video camcorder has on people. When someone points the lens our way, we try to hide. The video camcorder invades our privacy and we don’t like the scrutiny. If we cannot avoid the camera being pointed at us, we lamely try to come up with some pose or remark and hope the pesky relative or friend will quickly

move on to someone else. What agony, however, when they keep the lens trained on us, until we yell, “Get that thing out of here!” The Word of God can have this same uncomfortable, scrutinizing effect upon us. The Word of God reveals us as we are, candidly exposes us – just as a scalpel lays bare our innermost selves, and uncovers that which needs light and healing.

We would have to search hard to find a better example of the piercing judgment as described in Hebrew 4:12 than the one offered in today’s Gospel lesson. A wealthy man comes to Jesus asking about eternal life. In the Gospel of Matthew, he is young ... in Luke he is a ruler ... but here in Mark he represents more a generic human being ... which is to say this man represents all people ... us included ... who want to follow Jesus. Also, this is not a lesson on the evils of wealth. Rather, this is primarily a “call story.” Someone is being called to follow Jesus and the cost of discipleship is forth coming.

Of course, among the reasons for this man not accepting the call and following are that he has great possessions. There can be many reasons why someone might not follow Jesus. Here, wealth is the reason, but I get the impression that wealth is not the full concern of this text. A young person of wealthy mean meets Jesus and ... is asked by Jesus to follow. Unfortunately, the story ends not in the joyful acceptance of the call, but in a sad, depressed refusal to follow. Therefore, I believe that Mark’s lesson is simply a warning to each of us that there is a cost to discipleship ... and like a two-edge sword ... the call to follow Jesus can pierce through to the very reasons why we would chose *not* to follow ... *not* to believe.

I remember an old joke about an evangelist who, after preaching a long sermon, gave an altar call. “Come to the altar and give your life to Christ!” he said. No one came. In frustration, the evangelist said again, “Come to the altar, as a way of saying that you love and honor God.” No one came. In even greater frustration, the evangelist appealed to the congregation, “Come to the altar as a way of saying that you want to live a better life.” No one came. Finally in exasperation, he said, “Please! ... if you love your mamma, come down to the altar!”

Today’s gospel lesson reminds us that there are understandable, reasonable reasons for not following Jesus. Far too often Jesus is presented ... with the best intentions ... as the solution to all our problems ... the way to fix everything that’s wrong in our lives. But this gospel story reminds us that Jesus is sometimes the beginning of problems we never would have had, if we had not met him! At times, Jesus is that friend who speaks the truth ... we do not want to hear; points out our flaws ... we don’t want to acknowledge; loves us despite our faults ... but it’s a “tough” love that can hurt. In the case of this man, he walks away because he finds Jesus’ love too tough. The “scalpel of scripture” laid bare what was killing the spiritual life of this man, but he could not face the operation ... an operation that would free him from that which was preventing him from being close to God.

Again this is not a story about money. This is a lesson about being free to receive a gift from God. What Jesus is saying to this man, as well as to us, is that we cannot be so tied down that we are unable to respond. We cannot accept God’s gift ... if we have no spare hands to take it with. We cannot make room for God’s gift ... if our rooms are already full. We cannot follow ... if we are not free to go. This is why I believe the wealthy young ruler went away sorrowful. He understood all at once that he was not free. His wealth was supposed to make him free, but kneeling in front of Jesus he understood it was not so. Invited to follow, he went away sorrowful instead ... for he had great possessions that he lugged behind him like a ball and chain. He is the only person in the whole gospel of Mark who walked away from an invitation to follow Jesus. He could not believe that the opposite of wealth might not be poor but free!

When Jesus calls to follow, understand this. When we choose to follow, stuff gets left behind. Not because it is necessarily bad, but because it is in the way! Not because we have to ... but because we want to! To be saved is to be freed from the bondage of human expectations. To be saved is to be saved from the demands of our own human ambitions ... our impossible desires for self-perfection and cheap grace. To be saved is to be liberated from the domination of petty morality that is basically selfish and self-interested. To be saved is to realize that salvation is not a human enterprise but a divine activity.

Salvation is God’s work, not ours. It is not the church ... it is not the company we keep that saves us. It is God that saves us from our foolish selves and God alone!!! I echo what Harvard chaplain Peter Gomes writes: *With us, nothing works. The good suffer, the wicked prosper ... Our wealth does not make us rich; our poverty doesn’t make us virtuous. Our power does not heal, our knowledge does not enlighten. Peace is fleeting, and the grave seems ultimate and eternal. The gospel of wealth, pleasure, power, and sensation has no capacity to save us for and from anything. With us, nothing is possible. But with God, all things are possible.*”

The point is ... you need on a regular basis to take some of your earthly treasures and literally give them away. Not simply because you are done with them but because they are holding your soul hostage. The point is ... you need to do this for your own sake, not just to help the church or aid the poor; you need to give away what is holding you back; you need to cut away all that is preventing you from the boldness of faith ... and receiving the gift of God’s grace. Amen