

“Living on the Boundary”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

April 24, 2005

Text: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new” (II Corinthians 5:17).

This past week during the events that led to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger being elected as Pope Benedict XVI, there was a moment of ritual that caught my attention. There is an ancient tradition in the Catholic Church that after a cardinal has been elected Pope he enters into a special room in the Vatican that is referred to as the “Room of Tears.” While he is in the room he is dressed in the vestments that signify that he is now the Pope. He enters the “Room of Tears” as a Cardinal; he exits as Pope.

It is not clear how this room derived its name. Generally, it is believed that in this room the new Pope realizes the great responsibilities that he must bear and that the weight of that responsibility brings this person to tears. Perhaps there is another sense in which the room marks the end of one life and the beginning of another. One thing is sure. When Cardinal Ratzinger exited that room, he was a changed person and his life would never be the same again.

I.

In the Apostle Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth there is a section in which Paul speaks of the Christian life as a "new creation." "If any is in Christ," he writes, "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!" (II Corinthians 5:17).

Anyone who is familiar with the Apostle Paul's life knows how central this theme is to his life and letters. There are two essential tenets of Paul's faith that were non-negotiable. The first was that he had encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul was not one of the twelve disciples. He had never met the earthly Jesus. But he was absolutely sure that he had encountered the risen Christ and it was that encounter that authenticated his Apostleship.

The second tenet of Paul's faith was that the risen Christ had commissioned him to be an Apostle to the gentiles. The early Christian movement had its roots in Judaism. Jesus was a Jew. His disciples were Jews. After the death and resurrection of Jesus the followers of Jesus continued in their belief that following Jesus meant that a person had to be a Jew.

But under Paul's leadership something very radical happened. The gospel was preached to non-Jews. As it spread beyond Jerusalem to places like Antioch, Galatia, and eventually Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, Philippi, and Rome, more and more people were attracted to the faith. This prompted one of the first crises in the church that centered on the question of whether Christians had to follow all of the Jewish rituals and laws of purification or whether they were exempt from these. After a bitter struggle, the Church decided that the gospel was to be preached to both Jews and gentiles (Acts 15).

Having addressed the issue of the Christian as a "new creation," Paul goes on to speak of the ministry to which we are entrusted, which he describes as a "ministry of reconciliation" through which we speak of God's reconciliation with us through Christ and our calling to be "ambassadors for Christ."

In a remarkable autobiography, which he entitled *On the Boundary*, Paul Tillich describes his own life as one lived on a series of boundaries. His father was from East Germany; his mother from West Germany. Throughout his life he found himself on the boundary between faith and doubt, philosophy and theology, living first in Germany and then after World War II living in the United States. Tillich believed that the boundary was one of the best places for acquiring knowledge.

Today, the church finds itself living on a series of boundaries and these boundaries may provide a metaphor for our understanding the Christian life.

II.

One of the boundaries that the church faces today is the boundary between Christianity as both an “inclusive and exclusive” faith. On the one hand, there is an enormous force in inclusivity within the Christian tradition. It is found in the early chapters of Genesis, which place the particular history of the Jews within a broader context of creation, the fall, the great flood, and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 1-11). The story of the call of Abraham (12:1-4a) is the call to be a great nation and a great people so that “all the families of the earth might be blessed.”

The great prophet of the exile envisioned a suffering servant who would bring forth justice to all the nations of the earth (Isaiah 42:1-4).

That vision of inclusion is found in the New Testament as well. The ministry of Jesus was a ministry that reached out to the dispossessed of his time: women and children, Samaritans and lepers, tax collectors and sinners. Likewise as the church grew, it became evident to the Apostle Paul that in Christ “There is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female, for all are one in Christ”(Galatians 3:28).

Yet, alongside that notion of inclusivity, there is a clear stream of exclusivity. From the earliest days of Israel’s occupation of the Promised Land there was a clear threat of paganism and syncretism. The early prophets, Elijah and Elisha, fought valiantly against the religion of Baalism with its child sacrifice, cults of prostitution, and goddesses. The prophetic movement warned against what happens to faith when it simply accommodates itself to the culture around it. After the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon, both Ezra and Nehemiah warned the people against intermarriage with alien faiths and alien religious practices.

That theme of exclusivity resurfaces in the New Testament. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). The Apostle Paul struggled against the paganism and idolatry of the Roman Empire. In his letter to the Church at Corinth he writes, “Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness?” (II Corinthians 6:14-15).

III.

There is another boundary on which we live as Christians and it is the boundary between the freedom that is given to us in Christ and the responsibility to live as those whose lives have been redeemed by Christ and called to live in responsibility to God and to one another.

One of Martin Luther’s great writings of 1520 was his “Treatise on Christian Liberty” (The Freedom of the Christian). In that Treatise, Luther sets down two propositions concerning the freedom and bondage of the spirit:

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none”

“A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

Luther understood correctly that as Christians, Christ has set us free from the power of sin and death. Yet, as Christians we are called “not to be served, but to serve.”

I read with great interest this week in the *Christian Century* a review of Tom Wolfe’s new novel, *I am Charlotte Simmons*. The reviewer was William Willimon, who for twenty years was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. Willimon makes clear what many have suspected; namely, that the fictional Dupont University of Wolfe’s novel is none other than Duke University, although it could be almost any college or university in the United States. Charlotte Simmons is a young, innocent girl from North Carolina who ends up among the people whom Willimon calls the “lost souls of a university.” Sex, as Charlotte Simmons learns at Dupont University, is mostly recreational, but she also discovers that it is about power as well; the power to define other human beings and their worth.

Willimon concludes his review of the novel by observing that although Wolfe would have never meant it that way, it is an eloquent plea for campus ministry on our college and university campuses. In a world in which liberation, purpose, vision and truth have become problematic, Dupont University is a fertile field for anyone attempting to rescue a few for the One who is the way, the truth and the life.

Willimon relates in the article an occasion several years ago when Tom Wolfe visited the Duke Campus, where his daughter was a student. As he exited the magnificent chapel in the center of the University, Wolfe observed a number of statues above the front door of the chapel. Willimon explained that these individuals represented some of the great “saints” of the university. On one side there are some of the great figures of Southern history: Robert E. Lee, Thomas Jefferson, and Sydney Lanier. On the other side, Willimon pointed out, were some of the great preachers of the past. “That explains St. Francis,” observed Wolfe. “No,” said Willimon, “that isn’t St. Francis of Assisi. That’s Savonarola. “What?” asked Wolfe in astonishment? “You know,” said Willimon, “the great friar of Florence, the fire-filled preacher who most art historians despise and who was finally burned at the stake.”

“Only the Church would pull a stunt like that,” muttered Wolfe as he walked away.

It was only later that evening that Willimon said he finally understood Tom Wolfe’s comment. Wolfe was right. Only the church would place a statue at its entrance of the crazy prophet of Florence, Italy, who urged the citizens of Florence to cast their priceless books and works of art into what Savonarola called a “bonfire of vanities.” Only the church would be foolish enough to place a replica of this fiery monk to welcome the freshmen of a university with these words: “Young men and young women, don’t let investment banking lead you to hell! Don’t sell out to the Republicans or the Democrats! We are going to have “a bonfire of the

vanities” after the service today. Bring all those I. Pods, designer clothes and all that other ‘stuff’ and we will build a ‘bonfire of the vanities.’”

Too bad we don’t have a few more colleges and universities today with the guts to pull off a stunt like that.

IV.

Then, too, as a Christian community we stand on another boundary, this one between our calling as a Christian community and our responsibilities as members of a pluralistic society. Reinhold Niebuhr, in his magnificent work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, has a section he entitles, “Having and Not Having the Truth.” Niebuhr notes that as Christians we are those who both have and do not have the truth. We have the truth in the sense that we believe that God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is the decisive revelation of God. We do not have the truth in the sense that our apprehension of the truth is always colored by the fact that we are the creatures and not the creature and by the fact that we are all sinners and our understanding of the truth is colored by our own self-interest and selfishness.

That is why we would do well to remember this morning the words of the newly elected Pope, Benedict XVI, that two of the chief adversaries in our world today are secularism and moral relativism. But we would do well to remember also the warning of Niebuhr, that there is another danger and that is the danger of a fanaticism in our nation and in our world, a fanaticism that is born of claiming to have a truth we do not in fact possess.

That is why toleration and humility are two virtues we need to cultivate in the society in which we live. Abraham Lincoln, one of the most astute theologians our nation has produced, was once asked if he thought that God was on the side of the Union during the War Between the States. Lincoln warned, “Let us not say that God is on our side, but let us hope that in the end we will be on the side of God.”

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.