

“Old Time Religion”

a sermon by

The Rev. Dr. James F. Miller

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “God declared the Gospel beforehand to Abraham.” (Galatians 3:6)

What makes “old time religion” old time?

This is a truly odd question. Isn't it interesting that we don't ask this question about, let's say, democracy? What is “old time” democracy? Perhaps it is at the very least the culture that, amongst other things, values individual rights and, for example, insists that someone is innocent until proven guilty ... unless [it seems] that person, let's say, is Michael Vick or Barry Bonds!

I selected about as old time hymns as our hymnal contains [in its prissy and politically correct way.] I remember speaking at a Men's Breakfast at First Church, Clinton, South Carolina, and always being thrilled by their practice of starting with a hymn sing of real oldies... “Beulah Land,” “Shall We Gather at the River,” for example. These don't get a sniff in our hymnal, perhaps rightly!

But here's the thing; one person's oldie is another's totally unfamiliar. It's the flip side of trying to get a congregation to sing a new hymn. I pity the poor minister who introduced “Jesus Loves Me” for the first time. I am sure he got comments on the church steps after the service like: “I hated that new hymn. Never use it again.” Now that hymn has become a staple, part of the universal repertoire, a real oldie. I selected “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” because it was my grandfather's favorite hymn; he used to hum it all the time; I can hear him now; as he gardened, as he read the paper, wrote a sermon, or even as he was teaching me to fire a shotgun. We also sang “Blessed Assurance” because it is an oldie that paradoxically speaks precisely to our current world; the phrase at the start of the second two stanzas, “Perfect submission,” reminds us of the meaning of the Arabic word *islam* ...submission...which we have all seen Muslims incarnate in their prayer posture, heads pressed to the earth, perfect submission symbolized. This old hymn curiously reminds us of the universality of that religious virtue.

What makes “old time religion” old time?

St. Vincent of Lerins, in the fifth century, enunciated what has come to be known as the Vincentian Canon, a rule or standard to determine “old time religion.” [Some of you will recall me mentioning this in a class last Spring!] The Vincentian canon is not concerned with hymn tunes or with the latest theological or liturgical fad, nor the weirdest belief tendency. St. Vincent simply argues for a three-fold standard to determine the nature of the true faith. Vincent argues that three tests must be applied...in order. He articulated his canon or rule in a series of Latin phrases, once upon a time a language familiar to all seminary students: The three-fold test is *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*. Translated: “That which has been believed everywhere, always, by everyone.” “Everywhere” is the ecumenical or world-wide criterion. “Always” is the criterion of antiquity, and “by everyone” is the criterion of consent. There is something charming about Vincent in the fifth century writing of “antiquity.” Equally his “everywhere” was a fraction of the world as we now know it. More, his “everyone” was a concept that pre-dates the Great Schism of the eleventh century which saw the eastern, orthodox churches go their own way, the sixteenth century Reformation, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries explosion of churches in the Asian and African worlds. Yet, it is worth asking: what would happen to the world church today, what would happen to the multi-denominational fecundity of Protestantism, what would happen to Roman Catholic relations with other churches, if this canon were applied, if all Christian embraced some version of Vincent’s “old time religion?”

This may be a fond hope. On July 10, just a month ago, the Vatican issued a document which was produced to correct “erroneous interpretations” of the nature of the church. Of Protestant churches the Pope-approved document states: “because [they] have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery [they] cannot...be called churches in the proper sense.” This means we protestant cannot be called Christians “in the proper sense.” For Pope Benedict, clearly, our Protestant doctrine of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is so distorted as to remove us from what he regards as “old time religion.” He awaits our return to “Mother Church” for it alone carries old time religion.

We marvel at the sectarian violence between the Sunni and Shia in the Muslim world. For long held reasons, each regards the other as not part of their “old time religion.”

We may be tempted to fly into a rage or a fit of pious superiority when we think of the Vatican’s statement or the Muslim world’s divisions, but we should be cautious. Let alone that entire chapters of church history are filled with examples of Christian barbarity, let us ask what, if anything, could be believed not everywhere, but here; not always, but right now, today; not by all Christians, but simply by us here gathered. What might that be? We find it hard to agree about acceptable styles of hymn music! Is it possible to isolate a common, firm, universal of our belief system?

My younger son recently recommended I read a book entitled American Gods. I thanked him for his considerate advice and immediately ordered it, as he knew I would. To my horror and amusement a sci-fi novel arrived. My horror was a consequence of my tendency, well known to my son, to despise sci-fi, perhaps irrationally as are all matters of taste. My amusement was at my son’s sly tricking me into reading it, because he knows that once I order and pay for a book, I

will read it. In the book a simple tale is told of conflict between a new pantheon of gods, such as the internet, media, technology, and the old gods, led by Thor and other Nordic types from a nearly forgotten mythology. The book carries a twist when it is slowly revealed that the entire cosmic struggle has been orchestrated and ever in the control of the oldest of the old time gods, Odin, the all-father of Nordic mythology, who appears as Mr. Wednesday...Wodin's or Odin's day. The apparent rise and impending victory of the new comers was just that...apparent. The old time religion was ever in control, if deeply hidden. Old time religion is for everywhere, for always, for all.

So, if the old time religion is real and true and ever in control, what is it? What makes "old time religion" for everywhere, for always, for all? What makes it for here, for now, for us?

Hosea and Galatians give us two key tests, each very different, but each complements the other, and together they disqualify other tests.

In the mid to late eighth century BC, Israel was fast approaching the valley of the shadow of its final death. And Hosea saw a clear sign of this collapse. Leaders "are like those who move boundary stones" [Hosea 5: 10.] Moving a boundary stone means you cannot tell what belongs to whom; where you are; where you have been; where you need to go. A boundary stone is indication of the tribal inheritance; an ancient marker; it is both a sign from the past and a promise for the future; as such it is a foundation for the present.

Hosea teaches us that old time religion is our boundary stone. However we innovate and develop, whatever we try and test; no matter the style of music or architectural setting; we must not remove the marker of whence we have come. To do so is to cast ourselves loose from hope, for no longer will we know how to steer. Moral uncertainty, social incoherence, political distrust, and national confusion: all these result from the removal of our religious boundary stones, the great markers of the faith. Old time religion is that important. This is the unlikely message of Hosea.

But still we must ask: what may it be, this old time religion?

Galatians tells us, with clarity, with confidence, and with an unmistakable summons. Christians have debated for centuries about all sorts of things; the niceties of the doctrine of Christ, the nature of the church, musical styles, the working out of atonement, how to govern the church, even [as I have already alluded to] the power present in the sacrament. Yet, all these are but trivialities in comparison with what Galatians speaks of. "[God] announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you'" [Galatians 3: 8.] The *gospel* was announced *by* God to *Abraham!*

That's it. That is old time religion for sure. And this good news, this gospel is nothing other than a task; a responsibility. Abraham in this God-announced gospel was given a job to do...to bless all nations, to love the world, to carry a vision of human possibility, God's possibility for human life, to all people. For once and forever, Abraham and all his children were given purpose, meaning, and direction in life.

This is it. The God-announced good news which gives purpose, meaning, and direction to life: this is old time religion. Presbyterians often give this another label...predestination. Know this and never forget it: we are not predestined to privilege, but responsibility; not to passive relaxation in a state of beatific religious perfection, but to amazed responsiveness as agents for God in and to his world, which he loves. We are amazed because we must doubt God's wisdom in choosing *us*; we know we neither deserve his trust nor on our own are we capable of fulfilling it. His trust, therefore, is a promise of his continuing power in our lives; that power we call grace, the present power of the Holy Spirit. Our lives have thus been given meaning. We have been filled up, not with the trash of the world's passing fancies, but the treasure of heaven's own nourishing power and purpose.

All around us are hollow people; empty of hope; empty of real joy; struggling to get filled up and so feasting on the whipped cream offerings of culture; admiring those fabricated heroes we call celebrities; measuring their own eternal stature by their handicap at the country club or the success of their favorite team; even more sadly living vicariously through the structured and possibly imposed accomplishments of a child; seeking significance off the shallow pages of the gossip magazine or from the flickering and temporary images of the ever present screen, or now ever more so descending into the mirage security of possessing the latest gizmos and techno-gadgets. And all the while, in the secret depths of their souls they are haunted by emptiness for they know; they know they are empty, and they are longing to be filled. This knowledge takes many forms, but its most indelible is fear of death itself. For if life has no inner meaning and purpose it is nothing more than a walk to a bleak oblivion.

Old time religion, so clearly sung about in old time hymns, but not only there, is that which fills us and can fill all the hollow people. It is the good news of meaning; it is the good news of hope; it is the good news of purpose; it is the good news of world affirming joy.

You know the "Hokey Pokey," that old time, if secular, song? Lawrence Kushner has reminded us of its symbolic power [Invisible Lines of Connection, p. 50.] Symbolic power? You may well ask! But, Kushner advises us to think about it; what does the song proclaim and the dance make you do? "You put your whole self in, you take your whole self out. You put your whole self in and shake it all about. You do the Hokey Pokey. And that's what it's all about."

That's it. That's what it's all about. Putting your whole self in and shaking it all about. Unreserved presence in and for the world. No matter what you are doing. No matter where you are doing it. No matter with whom you are in any instance.

Christian people: go and cause a stir in the world; go and fill up hollow people; go and shake yourself all about; let them know that you have a faith that can fill their hollowness; let them know that you have a hope that can banish all that haunts them; let them know that you know where they in turn can come to be filled; let them know that this old time religion is for them in this time and that this old time religion is the God-announced good news. **Amen.**

[Soli Deo Gloria]