

“The Demands of Our Faith”

a sermon by

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Text: “And you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:32)

Several weeks ago I mentioned a letter written by a Lutheran theologian by the name of Carl Braaten, which was sent to the presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In that letter Carl Braaten mentioned a number of prominent Lutheran theologians that had left the Lutheran church and had joined the Roman Catholic Church. The primary reason that was given was the commonly shared conviction that the Catholic Church was willing to take stands – many of them controversial – while most protestant churches today seem to have accommodated themselves to the culture in such a way that there appears to be no real distinction now between the church and the culture in which we live.

There is, I believe, a hungering today for many people to have a faith that stands for something. For a long time we have been willing to encourage people to believe whatever they want to believe. In his book *Habits of the Heart* Robert Bellah discusses the role of individualism in American life today. There is one portion of the book where Bellah describes a young woman that he interviewed whose name was Sheila. When asked to describe her religion, she said that she didn't attend church but that she had her own personal brand of religion that she believed in. She called it “Sheilaism.”

That is an attitude that one sees frequently in our society. Many people believe their own little faith without any notion of a great faith that might inform their own lives.

I.

This is certainly the thrust of the passage from John's gospel. In this section (John 8:31-59) Jesus engages in a conversation with some of the Jews that he encountered. In this passage Jesus asserts that he is sent from God and that God is his father. Of course, some of the Jews are greatly offended by Jesus' claims. Then Jesus goes on to state to them, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8: 32)

So, let's be honest. The Christian claim is a claim about truth. On another occasion Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

There is nothing ambiguous in this. The claim of Jesus is the claim of truth. To be sure there are many people today who believe that Jesus is simply one truth among many. But that is not the claim of Jesus. It is as direct and forthright as anything could be. Jesus is the revelation of God. He is the truth.

So this morning we face a critical issue, namely the demands of our faith.

II.

One of the claims of our faith is that there is a moral order in the universe and one ignores this at his or her own risk. In Paul's letter to the church at Galatia, he states the Christian moral concept quite clearly."Do not be deceived," Paul writes, "God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap to the Spirit."(Galatians 6:7-8).

The Christian faith insists that there is a moral order in life. If a person violates that moral order, that person will bring judgment on himself.

The ancient Greeks had two words that summed up the matter quite well – Hubris and Nemesis. Hubris, which means arrogance and pride, was a quality hated by the gods because it often involved the cruel use of power and an overbearing insolence. The Greeks believed that whenever Hubris appeared, Nemesis followed. Nemesis was the judgment on the Gods on all that puffs up itself with arrogant presumption.

When Adolph Hitler came to power in 1930, he announced to the world that the German Third Reich would last for a thousand years. It didn't last fifteen years. In the end the arrogance, cruelty, and ignorance of National Socialism was crushed by the Allied Army that brought an end to all that Hitler stood for.

Martin Luther King, Jr. in his famous "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" once observed that there was a moral arc in human history and that arc inevitably pointed to justice. So, then, "whatsoever a person sows, that shall he reap." There is a moral dimension to human history.

III.

There is another dimension of the demands of our faith and it is not only moral integrity, but intellectual integrity. The writer of I Peter admonishes his readers to "always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." (I Peter 3:15)

John Calvin spoke of the importance of the "life of the mind." Calvin understood that loving God was a matter of the heart, but he also insisted that Christianity was also a matter of the mind as well.

Recently, I came across an article by Philip Yancey that appeared in *Christianity Today*. Yancey has long been a leading spokesman for the evangelical movement. In his valedictory address as a writer for this publication, however, Yancey sounds a word of warning to evangelical churches.

He writes, “The Jesus movement, the house-church movement, seeker friendly churches, emergent churches – evangelicals have spawned all of these. In their wake, worship bands have replaced organs and choirs, PowerPoint slides and movie clips now enliven sermons, and espresso bars keep congregants awake.

Yancey goes on to say that while he admires some of the innovations that have come in worship, he cautions his fellow evangelicals about simply mimicking the cultural trends. At the risk of sounding old fashioned, Yancey notes that he could not help but wonder at the depth of worship that is taking place in churches today. Seminaries now recommend a 15 minute sermon in light of shorter attention spans. Publishers want slimmer books, with simple words and concepts. Yancey wonders if we will soon have a 140-character Twitter gospel.

Preaching in the Presbyterian Church has always emphasized loving God with our hearts and with our minds as well. Preaching is the means by which the gospel is proclaimed and it must always been done with a reverence of Scripture and with a spirit of conviction.

In 1908 when the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church of New York City celebrated its hundredth year of existence, A. F. Schauffler, who was a very important teacher of church history at Union Seminary in New York wrote a letter to the session congratulated them on the management of the pulpit of that church. During the summer months, when ministers were on vacation, the session of the church invited some of the most outstanding preachers in this country and Europe to fill the pulpit. By doing so, Schauffler pointed out, the church did not only a favor to its own members but to the city as well.

No higher tribute could be paid to a session than that it provided preaching of the highest excellence and integrity.

IV.

Yet another demand of our faith is that we exhibit faith in our lives. One of the beatitudes that Jesus taught was this: “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” Now, for many of us, that sounds strange. Who of us would have ever said that?

But Jesus not only said that, he practiced that. Jesus placed a small child before his disciples and said to them, “Of such is the kingdom of heaven.” To find God in a child takes a clean heart, clean from sophistication and cynicism and unkindness. Jesus also looked around him at the world of nature. “Consider the lilies of the field,” he said, “they toil not, and neither do they spin. Yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these.” To find God in the lilies of the field takes a pure heart.

Jesus also discovered in certain individuals divine possibilities that no one else would have seen. When he chose his disciples, he chose ordinary fishermen. None of them had gone to college.

None of them had a Ph.D. But Jesus transformed their lives and found in them traits of character that in turn transformed the world. It takes a clean heart to find that in ordinary people.

You see, Jesus did not do what most of us do. He did not look for God somewhere in the stars or find God at the end of an argument. He was seeing God – do we get that – seeing God in children and nature and ordinary people.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. One of the new biographies published this year on the life of Lincoln is by James McPherson, who teaches Civil War history at Princeton University. Dr. McPherson spoke to a seminar that I attended in Princeton several years ago on the religious life of Lincoln. In that talk he pointed out that Lincoln was one of the most astute theologians our nation has produced. Lincoln was an avid reader who had a great command of literature and particularly the Bible.

Abraham Lincoln was not a member of a church, though he attended worship regularly at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. There is a pew in that church that is called the “Lincoln pew” and it is where Lincoln’s family sat. There is also a door to that church to which only the United States Secret Service has a key. That door is opened once a year on Lincoln’s birthday and every single President of this country since Abraham Lincoln has come to that church to pray at least once during the course of his presidency.

McPherson points out that most historians see a shift in Lincoln’s person philosophy that occurred late in his Presidency. It is found in his Gettysburg Address and in the Second Inaugural. In these last years of Lincoln there is a profound religious undertone in his speeches. In his Second Inaugural he speaks of “malice toward none and charity to all.”

There may be some here today who feel that this is a long way from where most of us are today. Most of us are busy with our jobs, our families, our lives. But it may well be there is one person who needs this more than any other, because sometimes life comes at us pretty hard, and often we do not have a lot of time to prepare for its storms.

In the past year I have conducted or helped to conduct some very difficult funeral services in this church. One was for a friend who died recently of a brain tumor. Another was the tragic death of a seventeen year old boy killed in a golf cart accident. The third was an outstanding attorney in our church who took his life.

Sometimes we have the opportunity to prepare for tragedy, but sometimes it comes quickly – a knock on the door, a phone call in the night – and suddenly we are faced with a great challenge.

That is why there is no substitute for a real faith in fair weather that will sustain us when the winds of life howl and waves of adversity threaten to drown us.

My prayer today for each one of us is that we may have faith to withstand every difficulty that comes before, hope to see the light in every darkness, and the love of Christ Jesus from which nothing – not even death itself can separate us.

Amen.