

“Old Time Religion”

a sermon by

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Text: “Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroad, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

This week I came across an article in *The American Scholar* entitled “The Decline of the English Department” written by William Chace, who teaches at Emory University in Atlanta. In this article he notes that the students who majored in English from 1970-2004 declined from 7.6 percent to 3.9 percent. The same relative decline occurred in foreign language majors, philosophy and religious study majors, and history majors as well.

In contrast, the number of students who majored in business has increased from 13.7 percent to 21.9 percent.

Chace notes that the reasons for this decline in interest in the humanities are manifold. Students still believe, even after the collapses on Wall Street over the past year and a half, that jobs in business will hold a better future. He notes also that many parents are reluctant to pay the high cost of college and university tuition for students who will not have the opportunity for high paying jobs.

But Chace rests the greatest cause for the decline of the English department on the English department itself. Over the years he notes that many departments have dismembered the curriculum. Instead of teaching the basic texts of literature: Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, etc. there has been an interest in secondary considerations (gender studies, sexuality, film and popular culture).

The same is true in theological studies today. Whereas a number of years ago, students were encouraged to read the great Systematic Theologians: Augustine, Calvin, Barth, and Tillich, today the focus is more on liberation theology, Latin American theology, Black theology, Feminist theology (not to be confused with Womanist theology), and the general interest in Gay and Lesbian issues.

It is hard not to view this situation without some concern about the future of education – both in the liberal arts but also in theology as well.

I.

This morning I have chosen a passage from the prophecy of Jeremiah that speaks to the need for the recovery of the faith. The passage from which I have read is in many ways a typical oracle of the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was in many ways a “man of sorrows who was acquainted with grief.” He prophesied in the period of Israel’s history shortly before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. before the Babylonian army led by King Nebuchadnezzar.

The burden of Jeremiah’s prophecy was to proclaim to the people of Judah that they had sinned against God by breaking the covenant with God at Mt. Sinai. For their sins the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed, the temple would be laid to ruins, and the king and his court would be taken into exile into Babylon. In verse 16, Jeremiah holds before them a ray of hope: “Stand at the crossroads; and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” Throughout the Scripture we often see that life is a series of alternatives – not dozens of them – but basic choices: life or death, the narrow way or the straight way, a house built on rock or on sand.

That is a word that is spoken for us today. We stand at a crossroads as a city, as a church, and as a people. We can choose life or death, health or sickness, progress or decline. So, what is that ancient path for which we so desperately search?

II.

The first component of the path that leads to life is the recovery of the primacy of the gospel. For a number of years the Presbyterian Church has been focused on a number of issues that have caught our attention. In the 1960’s, a great deal of attention was placed on the racial division in this country and the Civil Rights movement. In the 1970’s, the women’s movement caught a lot of attention in the church. In more recent years, the focus has been on issues of human sexuality, specifically the issues of abortion and homosexuality.

The danger of this of course is that issues tend to absorb all of our attention and energy and we lose sight of the most fundamental task of the church: “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.”

Now, issues are important. But they are not what constitutes a church. The church is constituted by God’s act in Jesus Christ. That is what is central to the church. If that succeeds, all else will succeed. If that fails, nothing else will matter.

In his work *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say that No One Else Can Say*, Dr. John Leith notes that the most critical question that the church faces today is the question that Jesus posed to his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” Those churches that can respond with the disciple Peter without hesitation, equivocation, or qualification in saying “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” are precisely those churches that are alive, thriving, and serving Christ. Those churches which cannot make that affirmation are lifeless and without a real future.

The Christian gospel is a primarily a word of God's grace in Jesus Christ. It offers to each of us at the beginning of a new year the opportunity of forgiveness, power to change, and hope for the future.

It is this gospel that gives ordinary people the power to live with grace, serenity, and dignity amid the joys and sorrows, the successes and defeats of life.

III.

The second component of the path that leads to life is the recovery of the Christian life. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* there is a quote from John Calvin that sums up the Christian life as follows: "We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway out plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not act it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: insofar as we can, let us forget ourselves and all that is ours."

John Calvin understood that the Christian life was a life of self-denial. There is nothing that could be more countercultural than that. In a time in which most people are so wrapped up in themselves – their wants, their wishes, their desires, the Christian faith offers us a very different orientation – a life not directed to self, but to God.

John McNeill in his book *The History and Character of Calvinism* relates a pivotal experience in the history of the Reformation. John Calvin was fleeing his native France under fierce opposition by the church in France. On his journey Calvin spent one night in the city of Geneva, Switzerland. While Calvin was there, the leader of the Reformation in Geneva, William Farel, paid Calvin a visit. Farel had heard of Calvin's brilliance as a scholar and preacher. In many ways, Farel was the exact opposite of Calvin. He was a large red-headed man with a loud voice who was described by some as a "hot gospeler." He visited Calvin that night to urge him to remain in Geneva to assist with the Reformation. Calvin refused. He believed himself best suited for a life of scholarship and study.

But Farel would not let him alone. Farel told Calvin that if Calvin refused to stay and help with the Reformation "God will condemn you" and Farel went on to say that he personally would pray that God would condemn Calvin.

Calvin was so frightened by Farel's prayer that he agreed to stay. The rest, as they say, is history. Calvin, through his preaching and teaching of Scripture, transformed the city of Geneva and became one of the great Reformers of the church.

This morning each of us stands at a crossroad. The New Year offers an opportunity that will not come again. We can pray, "My will be done," as most of us have been doing, or we can venture another prayer that says, "Not my will, but God's Will be done."

We have another choice as well. We can continue to live as if we are in control of our lives or we can acknowledge that it is God's grace that gives our lives power and strength.

That is the choice before us: life or death, the straight way or the narrow way, a life built on sand or a life built on rock.

This week I received a copy of the monthly newsletter of Dr. James Miller which is called "Hopelens." In this issue, Jim spoke about the difficulty of New Year's resolutions. So often they result in dissolution. The reason for this is that they are about what we want or think we need. We want to lose weight. We want to exercise more. We want a better relationship with our spouse or our children. Now, of course, these are not bad things.

But so often they fail because they are rooted in what we want and not what God wants. Jim suggests that there is one New Year's resolution that has the power to change our lives and so I give this to you for 2010: "I resolve to attend worship every week, if I am in town, not ill, or do not have work."

The stakes have never been higher. May God give us the grace to choose the way that leads to life and life abundant.

Amen.