

A Couple Comments on Purity

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Matthew 22:34 - 40

Those of you who know me may be in something of a state of shock to see me in sermon mode on a Sunday morning. What surprises me about this is that I volunteered! You also may know about me that I am somewhat given to rapid fire conversational banter. It just happens-- I just shoot from the lip. While the quip, and the retort, may occasionally hit the mark they are really rather low percentage shots. More sure and what does not come so easily to my mind, is the more deliberate, thought out, reasoned and composed response. I admire those of you who can on a Sunday morning deliver such a response to the morning's service or sermon. With me, that mode of thinking generally requires long periods of subconscious rumination. An appropriate sermon response will sometimes occur to me on the Wednesday following. Call for the mike though I might it's a bit out of sync. Jerome is in school You are about your business and I end up shouting into the wind. This is why I actually volunteered to do this morning.

What I want to do today is begin to respond to something Gene Miller said in sharing time on this Memorial Day past. And also to respond to a sermon Brett Kincaid offered sometime ago, last summer I think, that set me on my ear a bit. (sometimes the ruminations are somewhat extended)

Gene spoke in the context of memorial day of our approach to the peace witness, our solid assurance that we are so clearly on the straight and narrow of the gospel in this regard, and our perhaps self righteous attitude to those who see it differently and have made other choices. Specifically he spoke of his older brother who served in the military in Viet Nam while Gene served in IW in New York.

Brett spoke of the possibility of bringing the light of the gospel of peace to the institutions and powers we so often see ourselves working against by working with and within them instead. Suggesting that maybe even the Pentagon should not be

considered off limits. That is perhaps unfairly concise and there was much more to Brett's Sermon than that but that was the bit that got me all hot and bothered.

There are a series of national holidays beginning with Memorial Day, through this weekend of our celebration of our nation's independence and including Veterans Day in the fall which often make me uncomfortable, that I celebrate half heartedly at best. The discomfort has in part to do with a sense that since I often am unhappy with the actions my nation and its leaders undertake on my behalf that participating would be a betrayal of my values. I remember refusing to go with Simon and Babaak to the fireworks on the Mall on the 4 of July following our invasion into Iraq. I suppose I imagined by enjoying the fireworks that celebrate our independence from the tyranny of the British Crown I'd somehow be giving implicit assent to the Iraqi war. On reflection, and with the benefit of some distance and also more problematic and troubling I think it is also an desire to keep above it all, to not be dirtied, to be pure or to use Gene's framing-to be a self righteous _____. (By the way I think this concern for purity and the accompanying descent into self-righteousness are among the many dimensions underlying our conflict with the Conference and the broader Mennonite church-on both sides of that divide)

What I'd like to offer to Gene and to you by way of response and also some what tangentially to Brett, is to tell a story. Retell a story-is actually more accurate. Some of you heard this story from me some years ago at a HMC fall retreat led by Brother Dietz of PA. So my apologies to you who have heard this before, please feel free to zone out if your wish I'll try to give the signal when it's over and you can rejoin us at that point.

I was raised in the Hispanic Mennonite Churches of South Texas. A little side bar here-I put it this way "was raised in...." because I often feel like a decidedly second class Mennonite aside those of you who have made self conscious decisions as fully functioning adults to join this church. I was baptized as a preteen and while I admit this had some value and meaning. I consider that the real decision occurred in the sophomore spasm of radical Anabaptism that I experienced while studying at Goshen College. I remember having an argument with my father around that time-I think it

was about simple living or some such-in which he advocated a somewhat moderated and nuanced-you know a sort of middle aged view- of the matter and which I concluded with a pointed finger and the also rather pointed "Dad you are a sellout" So by way of apology for 30 year old insult I also Offer these comments also to my Dad-who I have to say is anything but a sellout- But back to my story.

My father and mother went to South Texas to do alternative service in place of military service during the Korean War. Mom taught kindergarten and Dad built houses for migrant workers. After they married Dad was drafted ("called", I think was the word of choice) to be minister to the Calvary Mennonite Church in Mathis. This is the church in which I grew up. A high percentage of that congregation earned their livings as migrant farm workers. In the 40's and 50's they followed the cotton harvest through the Southwest. When they were replaced by machines they began to follow the fruit and vegetable harvests in more far flung places. This life is a cycle of grinding poverty. Escape from it, difficult.

One of my childhood heroes was a MYFer in the church. Daniel Perez. He was a just a few years older than me. I remember him as tall and handsome. He had a beautifully smooth swing of the baseball bat-something I struggled in vain to achieve. He had a way with the girls that in 1968 I was just beginning to find reason to admire.

One of the means of escape from the migrant worker trap, a means actively preached against in church- was service in the military. In 68 I turned 13. Daniel turned 18 and chose that route and enlisted in the Marines. Within a year Daniel came home from Viet Nam in a box. It was devastating.

I remember witnessing intense debates as Dad and the church elders-particularly with Brother Saldivar regarding the handling of the funeral. A military funeral-a Mennonite Church. How is it possible? As a 13 year old I did not participate in the discussion but I was aware enough to know that the situation presented real and wrenching difficulties with no easy or comfortable solution or clean solution.

For love of Daniel's mom-the funeral was held at Calvary Mennonite Church. Even to my adolescent eyes. The scene was jarring. Flags and uniforms, guns and boots at the front of the church. The building overflowed with people-even those we called "the Anglos" from the other side of the railroad tracks came to pay their respects. I'm sorry to say that I do not remember what Dad said in the message-an unusual opportunity to say the least. (We so often preach only to ourselves.) I do remember-almost like yesterday the shock of the rifle salute at the graveside. And I do remember the deep, deep grieving of Mrs. Perez.

I tell this story because I think it an example of what I'd call a happy impurity. I do not really know of any towns people converted to the Anabaptist world view as a result of words said at Daniels funeral. I do not know of any military men laying down arms. The most I actually know for sure is that Daniels mother lived out her days as a faithful member of the Calvary Mennonite Church. Perhaps For that alone the impurity of a military funeral in a Mennonite Church had positive value.

On the other side of the ledger I learned from one of Daniel's cousins who many years later attended the celebration of my dad's retirement from the ministry that he, immediately after that funeral, enlisted in the Green Berets-motive: -to avenge a beloved cousin's death. Any story, any real story is inherently messy. This one is no different..

When Jesus was asked to identify the pinnacle of Gods law he responded not with a selection from the Torah which would've I suppose inevitably left out some essential. He responded, not with a favorite rule-but with the broad summation "love God and your Neighbor."

Jesus did not emphasize rigid adherence to a fixed set of black and white rules but focused rather on that big idea - - on the point of it all. Love God and your Neighbor. I find this intensely compelling and wonderfully, even graciously vague.

There is less concern here for being pure, for getting it all exactly precisely and consistently right in every detail than there is for being true, true to the main point of it all.

Our lives are in general, not clearly black and white affairs--they are infinite shades of grey--they are the very picture of impurity. As our lives evolve--both as individuals and as a community and as we work at discerning one shade from another we would do well to do so in the bright light of Jesus' summation: Love God Love your Neighbor.

So to Brett I, cautiously, warily say yes perhaps, perhaps and maybe there are ways that our concern for, our obsession with purity might be relaxed to the furtherance of our spreading the gospel of peace but we must be vigilant. Our march to Zion can easily and unexpectedly morph into lock step with the powers of darkness.

So to Gene I say amen and yes indeed. The approach to these matters is complex and the colors change with your point of view and life experience, self righteousness is counter productive and more than a little humility is warranted.

Let us hold Gods Law with a close and careful looseness. Let us keep our eyes on the prize. May we love God, may we love our Neighbor

Could you please turn to the insert in your bulletin? The Song of Peace. This hymn was requested several years ago by Mark Nord to follow a sermon of his for a service I was organizing as worship leader. It happened that Kaye actually had a copy of it in her music collection. It was sung this spring as the only music in the Quaker memorial service for our friend Martha Wenger. I used it For the Remanso de Paz service we had here several weeks ago.

I include it again today because it too is an example of a happy impurity. The music for this hymn was composed by the great Finnish composer Jean Sibelius during the days of the Romantic Nationalist Movements in Northern Europe-(which had I should point out some really unfortunate progeny.) He was a Finnish Patriot. Finland was engaged in a long and sustained resistance to the hegemonic power of its neighbor Russia and later to that of the Soviets. This hymn tune is considered the "second" national anthem of Finland.

The text of the hymn is by Lloyd Stone-about whom I know little. The poem is notable for its unabashed patriotism-its love of country coupled with the ready acknowledgement of the equally legitimate patriotism of the neighbor.

I think the hymn marries quite effectively the narrow nationalism of the Sibelius music with the broadly human text of the Stone poem.

Song of Peace
FINLANDIA

Lloyd Stone Jean Sibelius

This is my song, O God of all the nations, A song of
My country's skies are bluer than the ocean, And sun-light
peace for lands a-far and mine; This is my home, the
beams on clo-ver-leaf and pine... But oth-erlands have
coun-try where my heart is, Here are my hopes, my
sun-light, too, and clo-ver, And skies are ev - 'ry-
dreams, my ho-ly shrine; But oth-er hearts in oth-er lands are
where as blue as mine... O hear my song, thou God of all the
beat-ing With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine...
na-tions, A song of peace for their land and for mine...

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