

Message
2/21/2010
Tempted to Go Along

Text: Luke 4:1-13

[Note: the scripture was done as a dramatic reading in which I played the devil]

Well that was fun. You know I grew up as kind of a goody goody preacher's kid and followed that pattern through most of my life, so it's kind of fun to play the devil for once.

At the Disciples district 2 clergy meeting a week and a half ago, Rev. Jack Sullivan of Fifth Christian here in Cleveland shared an article he wrote some time ago about 5 things that can be learned from the historic black church.

Living and worshipping in the heights it is easy to forget how unique we are in terms of racial diversity. As I continue to come in contact with more and more churches I realize that there are not many churches that have the kind of diversity we do. So while we may still technically be a "mostly" white church, that is not how we act and we are better defined as a diverse congregation.

However, the points that Rev. Sullivan made are still important ones for us to be reminded of and so I decided they would make a good sermon series for Lent.

But let's start by going back to this story from Luke of the temptation of Jesus. In the story the devil offered Jesus choices, choices that differed from God's plan.

Commentator Kate Huey suggests that "Scholars are in remarkable agreement in their interpretation of this passage about Jesus facing an adversary who almost comes across as a "friend" who offers things that sound perfectly reasonable and good at first. After all, why shouldn't Jesus satisfy his hunger with a little bread, and wouldn't it be great if Jesus ruled the world (instead of the hated Romans), and how impressive would it be if Jesus flung himself off the temple roof and a thousand angels came to rescue him? If Jerusalem witnessed that one amazing thing, early on in Jesus' ministry, perhaps there would be no need for the rest of the Gospel, right?"¹

All Jesus had to do was acknowledge Satan's lordship over the world and claim the kind of worldly power that he was offering. In doing so, of course, Jesus would have been accepting the devil's lordship - would have given up his freedom to follow God and instead followed a path that would have led to much injustice.

The story reminds me of a scene for the Lord of the Rings movie in which a halfling, Frodo Baggins, is carrying a great, though evil ring of power. He offers the ring to Galadriel, an elven queen. It is tempting, because with this ring of power she could

¹ <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/february-21-2010.html>

finally destroy the evil one who created it and save the world from darkness and destruction. But, she says, using the ring would transform her, and would ultimately replace the evil lord with an evil queen,

It is perhaps, the same risk that Jesus rejected.

The early church stood for freedom and justice - though they were often granted little of either during the Roman persecutions. When, 300 years later, the church became "official" it started moving in a different direction, claiming power, which led to restrictions of freedom and much injustice.

Barbara Brown Taylor begins her sermon, "Lenten Discipline," with a short history of the way Lent developed, after being a follower of Jesus had become a bit "ho-hum," when Jesus' followers had "stopped expecting so much from God or from themselves," and "had become devoted to their comforts instead." Taylor's description of our ancestors fits us, painfully well, today: "They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large....They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy and God moaned out loud."²

Historic black church, consisting of people in America who also had limited freedom and were subjected to injustice almost universally claimed the early Christian position. They spoke out passionately on these issues and acted on them as well. We know that history.

For folks in power, and in this country that has always been white folk, the devil has always been the voice of reason. Economic reasons, scientific reasons, even religious reasons, have been given for maintaining the status quo. From scriptural "proofs" supposedly supporting slavery to arguments for patience during the 50's suggesting that justice should be allowed to wind it's way through the court system, "reason" has held back reform and change and real justice for those oppressed.

In our community (the Heights) we are used to a diverse community, used to people being concerned with freedom and justice, with ensuring equality.

HCC is a diverse church. We take rightful pride in that. And we developed a greater appreciation for how central that is to our congregation back in January at our adult forum on MLK's visit here.

But it's easy, tempting to sit on our laurels, to believe we've made it, to say we've done enough, or done all the right things and we're okay now.

The historic black church and scripture reminds us that we are never done, never "there." There is more work to be done, in ourselves, in our church, in our community. It is "temptation" that says we've made it.

² <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/february-21-2010.html>

It is easy to become a little passive. But there is no such thing as passive anti-racism - only active anti-racism. If we are not actively working to change things than we are part of the problem.

How do we become more aware, how do we figure out new ways to advance the causes of freedom and justice?

We can begin in this Lenten season, by looking inward, by examining ourselves; and by looking outward, becoming more aware of how racism, prejudice, and injustice play out in our communities.

We can begin by deepening our connection to the God of love, to the Prince of Peace. And by deepening that connection we can be renewed to continue to strengthen our commitment to freedom and justice

Having been renewed we can continue to preach anti-racism, teach anti-racism, and reach out through our action to confront racism everywhere we see it

Having been renewed we can continue to preach equality, teach equality, and reach out through our actions to show what true equality looks like

Having been renewed we can continue to preach peace, to teach peace, and to reach out to bring peace into our lives, our congregation, and our community

Having been renewed we can continue to preach justice for all, teach justice for all, and to reach out through our actions to show justice for all

Rev Sullivan in his article said that we must “listen for God’s non-negotiable call for all churches to engage in bold, innovative and risky ministries that dismantle historic patterns of... systemic injustice, and replace them with [the] reign of God values of peace, justice and unity.”³

In this season of Lent I would call on each one of us to look inward and then renew ourselves to work outward for freedom and justice in our world.

³ “What the Historic Black Church Can Teach Mostly White Mainline Churches About Faithfulness and Impact” by Dr. Jack Sullivan, Jr.

