

September 4, 2022

Rev. Kennedy

Preachers, Congregations, and the Scripture

Deuteronomy 30

Luke 14:25 – 33

Christianity is hard; being a faithful member of the church is difficult. My graduate professor in rhetoric opened his seminar in rhetorical criticism by saying to us, “By midterm half of you will have dropped this course. This is hard, challenging material. You will have to be at your best or you will fail.” I think more preachers need to take this approach. We often sound as if we are trying to sell people a bill of goods or as if we are afraid to tell people the truth. Preaching to congregations has never been easy. This puts a lot of pressure on the sermon, but I think that is exactly where the pressure needs to be. With intellectual integrity, with spiritual perception, and with powerful emotion, preachers court disagreement that leads to discernment, to change, to repentance.

But our culture has low tolerance for the truth. The philosophers say we live in the “post-truth” age. How easy it is to say, “Who are you to tell me what to believe?” “How Politics Poisoned the Evangelical Church” is an article cataloging the struggles of pastors who have tried to steer clear of secular politics. An evangelical pastor of a very conservative church says, “The crisis for the Church is a crisis of discernment,” he said over lunch. “Discernment”—one’s basic ability to separate truth from untruth — “is a core biblical discipline. And many Christians are not practicing it.” More people are leaving churches where the pastor tries hard to stay in the middle. The people are demanding politics from the pulpits. This is true in liberal and conservative churches. I grew up being taught not to talk about money, politics, or sex in the church. This approach has been left in the dust. Politics dominates even the churches, and the churches invited it in the front door. The churches have stirred the cultural wars as every major Protestant denomination has fought over the ordination of women and gay rights. “The battle lines have been drawn,” one fiery preacher says. “If you’re not taking a side, you’re on the wrong side.”

I think the church is in a crisis brought on by confusion about our relationship with our preachers, our Scripture, and its role in our daily lives. Preachers are as confused as everyone else. I wonder why anyone would go into the ministry now. I wonder if I would have gone to law school if I were 21 today. I’m serious. People have so little patience with preachers. People get so mad so fast. Preachers are intimidated by the world, by the congregation, by the culture.

I intend to face this crisis as if I were leading troops into battle on D-Day. We have the Scripture. We have all these church members, most of them now scattered to the four winds, and we have all these preachers. What can we do to help preachers and churches?

Look with me for a few moments at the lesson from the Old Testament – the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy. God calls people to a hard and demanding life. In our Scripture lesson there are

these words: "Turn now, all of you from your evil ways, and amend your ways and your doings." Tough words huh?

Here we are reminded that the life of obedience to God is a life of hard choices: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity." I'm not sure we believe this is true today. Yet the preacher of Deuteronomy insists that obedience to God is a matter of life and death. No wonder we are in trouble in the church because we consider obedience as a mere option of take it or leave it. I often wonder if people even stop to consider when they have a choice of doing something that obeys God and doing something they want to do. It has become such a natural practice that we just what we like, do what we enjoy, what we want to do. Church members are indicating they no longer even care about what is true. They just ignore the truth and if it doesn't go along with how they feel, they deny the truth. People do as they please and stamp JESUS on it as if Jesus blesses our ways. Have we forgotten that God's ways are not our ways or that our ways are not God's ways?

I think that Christians of all kinds struggle with all this upheaval over what we are supposed to believe, what we once believed, and what some Christians now believe differently. Once we believed a lot of different ideas that have changed with new information, new knowledge, new discernment, and new understanding.

Listen to these words from Deuteronomy about how we should live: "Loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." There are three practices here: loving the Lord, obeying the Lord, and holding fast to him. I think there are people who love God, who feel they are obeying God, but they have not held fast to his church. I think that obedience works itself out in our lives through our relationship to the church – the body of Christ. This is the hard way of the Christian, but this is the way.

Our reading from Luke 14:25-33 tells us exactly what is in store for us if we accept the call of Jesus on our daily lives.

Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. This is not exactly "family values." Why, it's downright radical.

Then Jesus adds, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Bearing the cross and following Jesus as the primary demand of faith also seems a bit of extreme? Radical, don't you think?

If that's not hard enough, Jesus also says, "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Count the cost." I became a Christian at age 8 and I didn't count the cost. It never occurred to me. I mostly thought about the soft peppermint stick candy that the pastor gave me every Sunday morning in his office when he talked to me about being a missionary or a preacher. I thought it would be cool to go to Africa as a missionary and ride elephants. Thought like a child. It wasn't until later

that I discovered that when our missionaries made converts in Africa and brought them to the USA, those dark-skinned Christians were not allowed to enter the church where my family attended. Strange.

I believe that preachers have been guilty of dumbing down the gospel for centuries in some cases. If Jesus really means what he says, there's nothing to do but give up everything and follow him. Preachers get coy and pretend Jesus didn't say what he said. Decades of simple sermons for simple people has reduced us to a type of biblical illiteracy. Even the smart contestants on Jeopardy are often stumped by biblical questions.

Then we turned our attention to getting people interested in biblical trivia and interesting tidbits about biblical texts. We were told that people would not stand still for solid doctrinal teaching or Christian catechism. Homiletics professors nodded brilliantly and soberly told students, "Your congregation can't handle more than 2 minutes of theological content at a time." Low expectations. Simple sermons. Three points and a poem.

Pulp preaching, I call it. Punchy dialogue. Such preaching shied away from the cross, the sacrifice, the obedience, the need for repentance and confession of sin. Karl Menninger wrote a book, *Whatever Happened to Sin?* A bestselling pop psychology book was called "I'm OK, You're OK, We're OK, It's OK." A cartoon in the New Yorker, an unlikely source for good theology, poked fun at the idea with a picture of Jesus on the cross saying, "If it's OK and you are OK, and I'm OK, what am I doing up here?"

We followed simple preaching with sermons with catchy titles and phrases. Preachers decided that slogans would save people. We turned biblical texts into positive lessons for living the best life possible. We ignored the hard passages, reduced the biblical canon to our favorite bromides and reduced the congregation's theological ability. I think we have turned preaching into biblical trivia.

Our preaching became harmless as we ditched the hard work of theology for our own opinions. Preachers abandoned the Bible for more modern sources. There is not a more pathetic sound in a pulpit than a preacher backed up with nothing but his or her personal opinions. The more preachers have dug around in the Bible desperately looking for cute stuff to say from the pulpit, the less seriously people take the Bible as the guide for faith and life. We stop taking God's word seriously. It no longer comes into play when we have big decisions to make about our daily lives.

Preachers have a primary responsibility to speak in careful, well-prepared, deeply researched, prayerfully considered, response to the biblical text. I can't be over concerned about whether a sermon sizzles or is interesting and fascinating to people. The sermon must be faithful to Jesus and to Scripture. We can't raise a generation of faithful Christians on the harmless preaching that shows up on television and in too many of our pulpits.

Preachers have to make the time to do the hard work of knowing multiple disciplines of study. Preachers who know history will not be telling lies about America being founded as a Christian nation. Preachers who grasp science will stop telling silly stories about the earth being a mere 6,000 years old. Preachers who study economics along with the gospel will understand why the

gospel has to be social. Preachers who study philosophy will know that knowledge and wisdom are partners of the pulpit. Preachers who study rhetoric will have resources for clear and powerful communication of the gospel. Preachers who study anthropology, ethnography, poetry, novels, plays, culture, sociology, education, political science will be prepared to speak with intelligence and integrity to congregations. We have no choice in this culture. Preachers can't afford being unprepared, lazy, inarticulate, boring, and uninformed. Otherwise, they will be captured by silly myths, conspiracy theories. They will even start believing that secular politicians can save us.

In fact, if a liberal preacher is faithfully proclaiming the radical teachings of Jesus, I venture the guess that he or she is not the pastor of a fast-growing church. The more faithful a preacher is to the radical demands of the gospel, the more likely that pastor is to be working in a small church. This is not the awful thing you may suppose. It may be the way of Jesus who only guaranteed us a cross. The closer Jesus got to the cross, the smaller his "church" became. In our text today, "Large crowds were traveling with Jesus." At the cross, there was a small group of women and Peter and John. Being Christian is not easy. We can be led astray by heedless living. We can be confused by harmless preaching, but what we most need is to accept that Christianity is hard. It has always been hard. It will always be hard. It is also a wonderful adventure. If we will struggle with Scripture as word from God, as guide for faith and life, if we take seriously the claims of Jesus on our lives, we will not forsake the assembling of ourselves in the church – the place God designed for us to work out our faith in fear and trembling. We need to tell people that being Christian is hard, really hard and challenge them to be part of the adventure. Don't give up on the church. Don't give up. Don't. Please don't.