

The Personal Way

A Sermon Preached at Hanover Street Presbyterian Church

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By the Rev. Thomas C. Davis, III, Ph.D.

Texts:

Ecclesiastes 1: 12-18

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after the wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered. I said to myself, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Galatians 3: 21-29

Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the scripture consigned all things to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under constraint under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

John 1: 16-18

And from his fullness have we all receive, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

On Wednesday evenings this month, several Hanover members have been enjoying study

sessions with our Jewish neighbors across the street, at Congregation Beth Shalom. These study sessions represent a next step in getting to know each other. For several years at Thanksgiving time we have worshiped together, and one recent Spring we shared a Seder meal in the synagogue. For many these opportunities were the first time a Jew ever worshiped in a church, or a Christian ever worshiped in a synagogue. Rabbi Dan and I felt it was time for us to take yet another step in getting acquainted. It was time, we decided, to do some study together, the better to understand each others' beliefs and customs. We wanted time for friendly conversation, so that we might clear up some vague understandings of the other's faith; and also, time to learn things about each other's faith which we had never ever considered before. Now we are half way through these evenings of interfaith conversation, and they have exceeded our most optimistic expectations. We have enjoyed the meetings so much that when Dan or I try to draw the small groups to a close, nobody wants to stop. When we adjourn, the conversation just keeps right on going over refreshments. Nobody wants to go home.

One benefit that I did not foresee in these study sessions is that I'm getting a new perspective on my own faith, not just my Jewish neighbors' faith. If you have ever had a significant exposure to a foreign culture, some opportunity or another, perhaps through travel, to see life from a very different viewpoint than your own, then you may have come away from that experience with a deeper appreciation of what's special about your own culture. As you know, I spent my childhood and youth in Wilmington. But, my home town never seemed very special to me. In fact, it seemed downright boring! Not until I had lived in Miami, Florida did I understand what's special about Wilmington. Not until I had lived in Vietnam did I properly appreciate what it meant to be an American. A similar thing is happening for me as a result of in these interfaith conversations. Not only am I learning about how some Jews think and feel. I'm also gaining an appreciation for what's special about my own faith. I did not expect this to happen; or at least, not to the extent that it has. It's quite a serendipitous blessing.

And what is it that I've come to appreciate more about my faith, as I have studied and chatted with my Jewish neighbors? The title of this sermon answers this question: I've come to appreciate much more that the Christian faith is a uniquely personal way to God. Let me explain. In these study sessions we have been reading a book entitled, *To Live: A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking*, by Harold Kushner. In the first chapter Kushner notes that Jews are born Jewish. If you are born to a Jewish mother, you are automatically a Jew, he explains. But, it's different for Christians, he observes. And here I quote him: "Christianity begins with an idea--the incarnation of God in Jesus, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as a way of redeeming man from sin. If a person believes that idea, he is a Christian."

I don't agree with Kushner, though I'm very glad he expressed the distinction between

Jews and Christians in this way, which prodded me to ponder what really is distinctive about my Christian faith. I do not agree with him that Christianity begins with assenting to an idea. I believe that Christianity starts with commitment to a person, namely, the person of the risen Jesus. The very first Christians had not yet figured out all the details of who Jesus was. It's clear from our New Testament scriptures that they did believe he was the long awaited Jewish Messiah, however, they followed him not so much because he fit that bill, but because he was an incomparably charismatic person. He was chock full of God's spirit. He healed and taught as no one else ever had. "You have the words of eternal life," one disciple said to him. Before they ever formed a Christology in their minds, that is, an understanding of how Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, before they were able to articulate the idea of incarnation, some people followed Jesus with utter fascination and devotion. Why? Not because he was the fulfillment of an idea, but because when people were with Jesus they felt they were as close to God as anyone had ever been before. Our reading from the gospel of John says it well: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made God known." In other words, people followed Jesus because in his presence they experienced God. The experience of God in and through Jesus was primary, not an idea explaining that experience. So, it seems to me that Kushner is wrong when he says that Christianity begins with an idea. It doesn't. It begins with devotion to a person, a living person. That was true for the very first followers of Jesus, and continues to be true today.

Now, Kushner is right about this: that Christians are not born into Christianity, as Jews are born into Judaism. Christians become Christians by making a decision. Kushner does have that right. But he is wrong about the content of the decision. The essential Christian decision is to follow a person, not a creed. There are many Quakers, for instance, who consider themselves Christians but nevertheless do not express their faith creedally. Kushner seems to think that Christianity is essentially a creedal religion, a religion about assenting to certain ideas about who Jesus was. This is not so. When we baptize adults, people who are old enough to make their own decision about entering into the faith, we do not ask them to express their faith in Jesus creedally. For example, we do not require that they be able to articulate their faith with ideas about incarnation, or resurrection, or justification by grace through faith, or any of those concepts which our Presbyterian church holds in such high regard. Rather, we ask them: Do you know Jesus as Lord of your life? Do you experience Jesus as your savior? Do you trust in Jesus?

Please notice: These are all questions about a personal relationship to Jesus. They are meant to ascertain whether the initiate into the faith has established a relationship to a living person, not whether he or she agrees to certain ideas about who Jesus of Nazareth was. (In Christian history, such ideas about who Jesus was are called dogmas. Incidentally, that word is not meant to have a negative connotation. It simply means "official teachings.") Dogmas are indeed important to many Christians, (including us

Presbyterians), but for a great many Christians, dogmas do not come first. Rather, a personal relationship to Jesus comes first. That's why I've entitled this sermon: "The Personal Way."

What is most distinctive about Christianity, in contrast to other great and honorable faith traditions, is that it is a personal way of knowing God. Christianity focuses upon a particular person, a person who (Christians profess) manifested God for human beings more profoundly and more dynamically than any other. Judaism and Islam honor prophets, who are regarded as God's spokespeople, and exemplars of faithfulness. But for Christians, Jesus is much more than a spokesperson for God, and much more than an exemplar of faithfulness. Jesus is a person so running-over-full of God's spirit that he enfleshes God for us. He is God with us.

Perhaps Kushner would retort: "Well, there you are. You've just made my point. You've just enunciated the idea of incarnation. You've just illustrated that what makes a Christian is adherence to that idea. Ah, but I would say to Kushner that I've merely put language to my experience. The experience of a resurrected and living person is primary; ideas about that person are secondary. Thus, the experience of a risen Lord doth a Christian make, not adherence to certain teachings about him. This was certainly true historically (for early Christians cleaved to Jesus before they theologized about him); and, considering our present Christian experience, it seems to me also psychologically true. That is, we modern Christians, no less than the first Christians, become followers of a living Lord not through believing second hand in someone else's experience, but rather by experiencing Jesus, risen, first hand for ourselves.

In this sermon I've laid a very strong emphasis on the importance in Christian life of experiencing the risen Christ. I'll devote another sermon to what this means--what does it mean to speak of the risen Christ today? Some of you may find such language very mysterious; and well you might, because it gets us into the mystical side of the Christian tradition, a side with which we Presbyterians have been rather uneasy all along. I just want to add that although I've tried to make the point quite forcefully that Christianity is more about an experience of the presence of Jesus than about any particular creedal profession concerning him, I do of course acknowledge that our spiritual experience is shaped by the faith tradition through which we seek to know God. So, to a certain extent, what we experience spiritually is informed by what we believe (even tentatively); and what we believe is obviously shaped by the lenses of whatever faith tradition we happen to wear.

Having said that, what commends a Christian lens over any other, say, a Jewish, or a Muslim one? Well, that's a complicated question, one which I won't try to cover in depth this morning. Let me just say, that in comparison to Judaism and Islam, which stress

obedience to God's laws as the way to holiness, Christianity stresses devotion to a person, and acceptance of that person's love and forgiveness. And that's a huge, huge difference. I'm not convinced that all persons do need the personal way, the way of Jesus, to find God . I have come to know several of my Jewish neighbors rather well, and they seem godly persons to me. Yet, they don't profess the personal way to God, the way of Jesus, so I figure that there must be other ways that work. I do read in scripture, though, the statements of people who have tried the way of getting wisdom (as we see in today's reading from Ecclesiastes), and the way of striving to obey the law in every detail (as we find in Paul's writings), and such scriptures tell me that other people who were very learned and very earnest found only frustration in these ways to holiness. Rather than making absolute statements about which way to God is true and alone proper, I shall keep trying to appreciate and express the way I have found, the personal way to God, as best I can. Why? Because there are people out there who will live at all, let alone better, because they discover and follow that way. We Christians do not have to prove that our way, the personal way, is the only way, nor perhaps even the best way to God for us to realize that it is precious to us, and will prove precious--indeed, life saving--to many, many others. This is plenty good reason to tell the good news about a living Lord. So we should not desist from evangelizing because our motives for telling the good news may not coincide with the missionary intentions of our ancestors.

For those of you who have not come to the interfaith dialogues yet, I invite you to attend this Wednesday evening here at Hanover. You shall surely learn more about the Jewish faith, and you may serendipitously discover more about your own too. May God enable us to share the good news of the risen Christ with kindness and sensitivity. This is light we should not hide under a bushel.