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8 August 2010
Psalm 33:12-22, Luke 12:32-40

“Mixed Messages”

Several days ago, popular novelist, Anne Rice wrote a message for her fans on Facebook. "Today I quit being a Christian," she wrote. "I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being 'Christian' or to being part of Christianity...For 10 years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.... In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen."

I learned from an NPR interview with her, that Ms. Rice grew up Catholic, then became atheist at one point and left the church, only to have what she describes as a conversion experience 10 years ago, which brought her back to the Roman Catholic faith. Now, it seems, in her leaving the Church, she says she still believes in God, and claims that there is a difference between being converted to faith, and being converted to membership in Organized Religion.

[‘Organized religion’ is one of my favorite oxymorons. No one who has ever really been a part of a religious community should accuse us of being organized.]

Several of us in our United Church of Christ denomination responded rather quickly to Ms. Rice - wanting her to know that there is actually a church in which she might feel theologically at home. Indeed, the Christianity she describes - as being anti-gay, anti-birth control, anti-Democrat and anti-science - is hardly an accurate picture of the wide breadth of the Christian Faith. She may be describing the current views of some of our more conservative brothers and sisters. But does Rome speak for the entirety of Christianity?

If someone were to ask me to define Christianity, of course I'd be ready with a quick, "it depends on which Christian you're talking to!" But if they wanted my opinion, I would define Christianity as a religion centered around the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the one through whom I understand who God is and how God works in the world. In addition, being Christian means participating in the life of a church - a family of believers and seekers, who occasionally disagree with one another, but who are nevertheless committed to each other and to all of God's people. It is the duty, I would claim, of all Christians to resist hatred of all forms - be it sexism, racism or heterosexism--because that's what Jesus did.

Now, based on Ms. Rice's statements, and based on your own experiences probably, many of you may rightly conclude that I might not be defining Christianity in a way that all Christians would recognize, let alone support. If I may be so bold, I would hazard a guess that Ms. Rice might find my definition of Christianity to be at least slightly less offensive than her operating definition. But clearly, the fact that she has her definition means that there are some mixed messages out there about who we are and what we believe.

When multiple voices, on opposite ends of the spectrum, both claim the authority to define Christianity, who gets a claim on 'the Truth'?

And this of course isn't limited to religion!

Anyone who watches Fox News and then switches over to MSNBC is getting very mixed messages about our country and the direction in which we're headed. One sees armageddon, the other sees utopia; and of course, during the last administration, those respective roles were reversed.

What are we to do with these mixed messages?

In the Luke passage we just heard, Jesus begins by talking about how God takes care of us, and we shouldn't worry so much. Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Creator's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." How lovely, this image, how soothing and comforting - it is God's pleasure to give to us the gifts of God's realm, and we can just let go of our worry and our questions and rest calmly in the love of a gracious and generous God.

So here I am, with my aloha shirt and flip-flops - I've got my sun block in one hand, and a nice drink with one of those little umbrellas in it in the other hand - and I'm just getting ready to sit back on a comfy chair under the shady palm tree of God's grace; And Luke's Jesus turns on his heels and says,

"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit...Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes!"

Holy smokes! I think I just got flipped out of my chair!

Does this not seem like a mixed message to you?

Relax - don't worry - God loves you and will take care of you - but *get ready because you never know what's coming!!*

'Christianity has failed - it is exclusive and self-serving.'

'Christianity is the embodiment of hope - a religion of love and justice for all people.'

Mixed messages.

'Deficits don't matter, except when you want tax cuts for your major contributors.'

'We're going to drain the swamp of Washington corruption - but only those areas where our people aren't going to suffer the consequences.'

Mixed messages.

'Relax! God loves you and has sufficient grace to sustain you through any trial.'

'You'd better get your house in order, because Jesus is coming unexpectedly - like a thief in the night.'

Mixed messages.

So what is a person to do?

How are we supposed to know which way to turn - who's in charge here? Where does the buck stop?

A couple of weeks ago, I preached about prayer as a way of discerning God's will. I think that prayer in these moments, when we're getting conflicting messages about what Christianity is, or about resting in God's grace vs. getting ready for Jesus's return - I think prayer can be a source of comfort in times of confusion.

When I'm in these spots, I often feel better, just saying out loud, "God - I'm getting mixed messages here, and I'm not sure what to do. If you could help me out, I'd really appreciate it!" (Prayer doesn't always need to be formal.)

Asking God for help is a way of acknowledging our own limitations, of humbly approaching the Divine and opening not just our ears, but our psyche as well, to be more aware of the messages around us--even if they're mixed.

Many Christians find the Bible to be an effective guidebook in sorting out the mixed messages - but as we've already heard, the Bible is hardly absent of mixed messages. Indeed - the thing is full of contradictions and ironies, of complex theologies and even some rather disturbing images of God. To claim that the Bible speaks in a unified voice, that it is unanimous and clear at all times about all things, simply reveals the fact that one has not actually read much of the Bible.

In Psalm 33, which we heard this morning, the Psalmist says to us,

"a king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength... Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear God, on those who hope in God's steadfast love; to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine."

Reading this literally for a moment, we can understand liking the idea of a strong army. In our country, our strong military is a source of great national pride for many of us. Our elected representatives laud our large and capable military, love surrounding themselves with soldiers, celebrate their successes over seas, and often brag about us being the last 'superpower' in the world.

But we have other kinds of warriors too.

We love our sports in this country. We send warriors out to do battle on football fields and basket ball courts. We put warriors in cars and on boats and on bikes and on skis - and send them hurtling around at phenomenal speed, always trying to go faster, higher and further.

We love strong warriors in the army, in sports and even in business. Even in spite of our economic collapse, there are still a large number of folks who think the free market is the only thing that can restore our economic well-being. And who does better in that system than a large army and strong warriors?

Ours is a culture that claims to value competition, but even moreso, we value certainty. We value making lots of preparations - *perhaps* because it's easier to heed Jesus's warning about being prepared, than Jesus's assurance that all will be well.

The Yankees are a hugely successful baseball franchise, based on winning at any cost.

Our military wants to think of itself as undefeatable.

We are home to the largest, wealthiest corporations in the history of the planet.

We celebrate strength and large numbers. We celebrate military and economic success - we *are* that King with the large army. We love a warrior with great strength.

But, "A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength."

Those who think they have it all figured out, and don't want to acknowledge that the messages are mixed; those who have all the resources and those who have all the talent and good looks are not saved by those resources or good looks. At the end of the day, winning on the battle field, football field or Marshal Fields is not what God is looking for. [I know, it's Macy's now. The poetry was too good to pass up.]

The psalmist says, "Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear God, on those who hope in God's steadfast love." The eye of the Lord, or, God's attention, is on those who are humble toward the divine - those who acknowledge they don't totally understand the divine. Fear comes from a lack of understanding--an acknowledgement, if you will, of mixed messages! So maybe those mixed messages, rather than something to worry about, are actually what leads us to a closer relationship with God.

I was critical, a moment ago, about how mixed and confusing the biblical messages can be. I have to admit, that I actually love the Bible. I love it because it's as messed up as we are. I love it because it does give us mixed messages, and doesn't *do our faith* for us - it invites us into prayer and discernment. It invites us into relationship with each other and with the text; because without that relationship, the words on the page are meaningless! Without us opening the Bible and reading the stories, wrestling with the images, and discussing it with each other - without us praying to God and saying, "what the heck are you talking about?" - then faith is meaningless.

Faith isn't about certainty.

Faith isn't about amassing large armies and strengthening yourself for battle.

Faith is a willingness to open oneself up to other thoughts and ideas - a willingness to open yourself up to the movement of the Holy Spirit in prayer and in relationship with others.

I think there's hope in that. I think there's hope in the fact that God knows we're getting mixed messages. God doesn't expect us to have everything figured out, and is actually more interested in us when we acknowledge that we haven't figured it all out - we might even fear some of those mixed messages and our hope is that God will love us anyway.

So even if others define Christianity in a way we don't recognize, and even if we get mixed messages about Jesus himself - it's okay. We have each other, we have prayer, and we have God.

I have faith that all will indeed be well.

Amen