

“You Oughta Warn People”

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

Rally Day: September 8, 2013

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Bait and switch: it is an advertising and sales strategy under indictment by ethical marketing for years. You know how it works: you want to buy a new mixer. You look at the fliers and find a terrific buy. You go to the store and there it is.

But it doesn't quite look like the picture in the paper. Oh, well, nothing ever does. It DOES seem to be made of heavy grade aluminum foil. It has one speed, one attachment and a motor that...well, the scrambled egg might win.

No reason for dismay, though! A helpful salesperson intervenes to introduce you to other models. *“There are some other kitchen mixers over here you might like. They cost a little more but you can really tell the difference, and you seem the sort of person that appreciates quality.”*

Thirty minutes after you walked in you walk out with five forward speeds, reverse, overdrive, a dozen attachments: it will do everything but mow the lawn. You paid six times what was listed in the advertisement but it IS a good machine. Still, you have this sense that something has happened you didn't really want to happen.

The question on Rally Day is whether the Church practices this gimmick. Do we seek to modify or minimize the claims of Christ in order to get people in the pews? The lectionary texts speak of God who is serious about our turning from evil and of God's son who identifies his way as a costly, costly way: the way of the cross.

Some people don't like this God who demands much. Pare God to something more user-friendly. Tommy Lasorda, former manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, once ascribed his success on the ball field and in the weight loss battle to “The Great Dodger in the Sky.” Woe to San Francisco Giant fans, I suppose. (Noll, Plantinga and Wells, “Evangelical Theology Today,” *Theology Today*, Jan., 1995, p.497).

Leander Keck of Yale Divinity School is known to some of us through the video segments of the “Disciple” Bible Study series. He says our desire to domesticate God means that God, “having been reduced to the Great Enabler, now has little to do except warrant our causes and help us fulfill our aspirations.” (Keck, *The Church Confident*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1993, p.36). Those with roots in Reformed or Presbyterian traditions will recall the first article of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The question “What is the chief end of human life?” is answered “To glorify God and enjoy God forever.” Keck observes that we have turned this on its head so that our response today might be that **God’s** chief end is “to glorify us and to be useful to us indefinitely.”

If God’s purpose is to please us this makes sense. But there is little warrant for that in these or any other Biblical texts. Instead, we hear Jeremiah’s prophecy telling us God is like a potter, molding and shaping us at the potter’s wheel “as it seemed good to him.” We are shaped and built up into the vessel God desires when we turn from evil.

Jesus builds on this by saying it is common sense. Going to build something? Count the cost. Otherwise, folks will laugh because you started but couldn’t finish. Going to fight a war? (Remember, this text comes from the lectionary and was not chosen for political timeliness). Going to fight a war? Count the cost. If resources are inadequate for victory, send ambassadors for terms of peace.

These words, Jeremiah’s and Jesus’, are so bold and brassy and sometimes discouraging that we may wonder why his followers remembered them, wrote them down and recited them in worship. After all, not everything Jesus said made it into the scriptures. No stenographer followed Jesus into the large crowds. No video. No YouTube. But they remembered them because they were not a strategy for recruitment, but good news for forming and shaping disciples: cost-counting, cost-bearing disciples.

Isn’t that always where it gets dicey? What’s it gonna cost? What are God’s terms for the transaction? Everything. It costs us everything: our life, possessions, preoccupations and prejudices. No negotiation.

Some of you may recall this in the first anniversary of my mother's death. Not knowing she was about to die, Carol and I left her with my dad in Maryland two hours before she passed, driving here in time to lead my first Rally Day. Some of you wondered later how I did it, and why I didn't tell you that morning. I was able to do it because God equips those whom God calls; and because my mother would have expected no less from me. And I didn't tell you because I knew God was with me; and who wants to rain on a parade? We had a great day a year ago and are having one today. Thanks be to God.

In fact, I invite you to consider the responsibility of this pulpit. I am appointed to it by the Bishop and I am ultimately responsible to God for what comes out of it, whether it is out of me or others to whom I have entrusted it. So to be present and molded by God, even if heart and head may be elsewhere, is my responsibility. Each Lord's Day I am, as a flawed and imperfect person, to present the unflawed and perfect son of God, Jesus.

One church-growth consultant says preachers spend too much time working on their sermons. "Just say something helpful," he declares. About a century ago it became fashionable in Protestant churches to place a small brass plaque on this side of the pulpit with a verse of scripture, John 12:21. Greeks come to the apostle Philip seeking Jesus and say "Sir, we would see Jesus." So the plaque, reminding the preacher of the true need of the people and true responsibility of the preacher, reminded "We would see Jesus." What a difference from "Say something helpful."

C.S. Lewis, the English agnostic-turned-Christian apologist once wrote: "*Foolish preachers, by always telling you how much Christianity will help you and how good it is for society, have actually led you to forget that Christianity is not a patent medicine. If Christianity is untrue, then no honest person will want to believe it, however helpful it might be; if it is true, every honest person will want to believe it, even if it gives....no help at all.*" ("Man or Rabbit" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Eerdmans, 1970, p. 108).

Folks who know this best have taken the plunge. Patrick J. Willson, former pastor of the Williamsburg (VA) Presbyterian Church, tells of having coffee with a friend late one night after an angry, frightening meeting. “You oughta warn people,” the friend said. They were both on the board of what they hoped would become a home for abused children. A house had been leased but the meeting with the neighborhood had been angry. Over cups of coffee they wondered why they bothered. “If it was up to me,” the friend continued, “I’d shelve the whole project and walk away from it. Problem is, I don’t know how to walk away from Christ. You oughta warn people how much it’s gonna cost ‘em to be a Christian.” Williston’s friend had not grown up in the church, first going into an Episcopal church because they had lunch on Lenten Wednesdays and the church was next to his law office. He came for a bowl of soup. Now, investing time, money and legal skills to secure a home for abused children, he endured abuse himself. “You oughta warn people,” he said.

Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way
Thou art the potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Consider yourself warned.