

"How Long?"  
JOHN 13: 31-35

May 2, 2010  
University Church of Chicago  
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

In an article in the New York Times Book Review Nora Sayre talked about her friendship with the literary critic and novelist Edmund Wilson. "After I'd spent five years living in England," she wrote, "we compared our loathing of Cambridge and Oxford." That sentence surprised me, because to my provincial mind those universities have always represented the epitome of learning and erudition. But Ms. Sayre goes on to say, "We had both recoiled from those communities where a gentleman--that is, a scholar--couldn't honorably discuss his own field. Many thought it was vulgar to disclose what one knew. Hence the flight to small talk: stamp collections or comparative mustards--and above all, electric blankets...Americans were thought to lack refinement if they were bored by recitations of railway schedules or accounts of rain and snow. It was maddening to be in the presence of fine minds that would not expose their contents."

In the Farewell Discourses in the Fourth Gospel, Our Lord's mind is exposed to us, his followers, in great detail. St. John ends his account of Jesus' public ministry fairly early in the Gospel, at the end of chapter 12. Then in chapter 13 he gives his account of the final meal Jesus has with the Twelve. Following that story four long chapters are devoted to the meaning of Jesus' departure from them and the ongoing lives of his followers as he prays for them.

The problem with being a preacher is that we who in St. Paul's words are in danger of becoming nothing more than "peddlers of God's Word" (2 Cor. 2:16) get too interested in **how** to tell a story instead of **what** stories to tell and **to what end**. Frederick Buechner has pointed out that preachers love "anecdotes, attention-getters, illustrations, stories to hang on sermons like lights on a Christmas tree."

We choose the stories that will go over best and be remembered to our credit longest. Or, if you happen not to be a preacher, when it comes to just speaking of and out of your faith in a general way, you, like us, then stick to the peddling of it. When you talk with your friends about faith, you are apt to speak of whatever is easiest and whatever you think will go down without too much

gagging and spitting.

We tell stories about other people and sometimes we tell stories about ourselves, but not for the most part our real stories. Not stories about what lies beneath all our other problems, which is the problem of being human, the problem of trying to hold fast somehow to Christ when much of the time, both in ourselves and in our world, it is as if Christ had never existed.

Like Edmund Wilson's and Nora Sayre's learned friends, we tell what costs us least to tell and what will gain us most. To tell the story of who we really are and of the battle between light and darkness, between belief and unbelief, between sin and grace that is waged within us costs plenty and may not gain us anything. We're afraid to tell it because all we often get in return is silence and a fishy stare.

In her autobiographical work, *The Spiral Staircase*, Karen Armstrong notes that in most religious traditions, faith is not about belief but about practice. "Religion," Armstrong writes, "is not about having to believe or accept certain difficult propositions; instead, religion is about doing things that change you."

That is why the central theme of this story is when Jesus says to his followers, "Little children, I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." He does not tell them what to believe or outline the parameters of orthodoxy. The commandment is not about what you believe. It is about how you live.

One of the most remarkable experiences I have ever had was to participate in worship services in Cuba Methodist churches. I even preached (albeit with the aid of a translator) to a packed church in the city of Pinar del Rio in a worship service that lasted over two hours. Something powerful and real is happening in Cuban Christianity, something that transcends sociological analysis or reasonable accounts. They, the Cubans, attribute the phenomenon of spirited, Pentecostal-style worship and thousands of Cubans returning to the church to the work of God's Holy Spirit.

Our host pastor in Pinar del Rio was the Reverend Moises Isla. To indicate the changes that God is working in Cuba, he told us about being in a bus station one day. He was reading his Bible, and when he looked up he saw people gathered around him. They wanted to talk to him about God's Word, they wanted to know how to get a Bible, they wanted to discuss what it means to be a

Christian.

The difference between that kind of fired-up Christian experience in Cuba and the kind of desultory worship and witness we make is scary. I was reminded of Kierkegaard's indictment: "The situation in the church is not that the clergy are sunken in dissoluteness and wild debauchery. By no means. No, the church is sunk in inanity, in tribal philistinism and they drag the parishioners down into this flat mediocrity and absence of spirit [which] has blabbered Christianity down into something meaningless, into being spiritless impotent, suffocated in illusion."

"Every heresy is an attempt to narrow the church," said G.K. Chesterton. I am fascinated by the heresies that have wracked and rent the church through the centuries, but they all have one common characteristic: the heretic did not set out to be a heretic. The heretic always sets out to make the Gospel fit his/her too-narrow definition.

But when the Holy Spirit comes, things break loose. Death is changed to life. Words of comfort and joy speak through the tumult of mistrust and anger. The disciples had to deal with the absence of God just as we do. A shocking but true fact. Except for Judas and Thomas, we have a pretty high regard for the Twelve and the women who knew and followed and bankrolled the operation. Well, of course, Mary Magdalene has from time to time introduced a bit of dubious notoriety into the group.

But we don't think of them as people like us. We have almost made them into idols, into icons painted on stained glass windows instead of understanding them as real people who had to live lives in the midst of absence, anguish because their beloved Master had left them. Why then were these Farewell Discourses included in the Gospel? To reassure those who, like us, pray Sunday after Sunday, Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again.

When John Wesley landed in Savannah, Georgia in 1735 to serve as an Anglican missionary, he was confronted almost immediately by Peter Bohler, an imperious German-Moravian missionary. They had a challenging relationship about faith and doubt throughout Wesley's three-year stint in America. After his almost complete failure in Savannah and a failed love affair with Sophie Hopkey, Wesley was preparing to return to England.

He confessed to Bohler that he didn't have much faith left. How

then could he preach? Bohler's reply changed Wesley's ministry and his life: "Preach faith until you have it. Then when you have it, you can truly preach it."

Isaak Dinesen in her book, *Out of Africa*, tells about a boy named Kitau who appeared at her door one day to ask for a job as a domestic servant. She hired him but was surprised when after three months he asked her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim who lived in a nearby town. Dinesen offered to raise Kitau's pay in order to keep him, but money was not the issue. Kitau had decided to become either a Christian or a Muslim, and his purpose in working for Dinesen had been to see up close the way a Christian lived. Now that he had worked for Dinesen and had seen the ways of Christians, he would go and observe Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behave; then he would decide. The author remembers how she wished Kitau had told her that before he came to live with her.

When Jesus says, "Wait a little while and I will be with you," don't you want to cry out, "How long is a little while?" Just as you did when you were a kid in the back of the car.

Over and over again Kierkegaard reminds us that we are by what we measure ourselves by. If you measure yourself by the world's standards, then you become a secular, money-grubbing, angry, cynical person. If, on the other hand, you measure yourself by God's commandments and opportunities, by the providence of God ever challenging, ever changing you, then you become one who knows that death is not life's final answer.

The biggest question for many of us is summarized in a big word, epistemological. Epistemology is about **knowing**, not just knowing with your head but trusting in your heart. How do you know it's true? Do you have to know before you can do? Or is it possible that in the doing there is knowing?

There's such an ache for what we've lost along life's way. It seems a long time ago and a long way away when we were innocent and our faith was clear. So many things have happened in the meantime: so many books read, so many sermons heard, so much life lived that to hear words from Our Lord about the Spirit giving us God's gifts seems incredible.

Christ comes to us in many disguises. The Spirit speaks in many

languages and dialects. As Alfred North Whitehead put it, "In our solitariness with God, we move from understanding God as God the void to God the enemy to God the companion."

To some in this sanctuary today the word God conjures up a big blank space. To others, God is an enemy, one who like Jacob we have wrestled with over and over, struggled with and have the limp to show for it. For a fortunate number, God has become the companion, the One to whom we can pray with confidence and relate with trust, the One who breaks through the disguises.

Is it madness to believe such a thing? Is it madness to believe in God at all, let alone in a God who speaks to us through such obscure and fleeting moments as a man and woman walking on a dusty road to Emmaus, or Elijah seeing God's purposes not in the big stuff--earthquake, wind and fire--but in the still, small voice, in Peter having a dream about all kinds of good foods that he had always wanted to eat?

Is it madness to believe that such moments are windows into the truest meaning and mystery of the cosmos itself? It is, indeed, a kind of madness. A divine madness, a belief that we can know God in mystery that becomes miracle. Or, at least we can catch occasional glimpses.

At the end of Walker Percy's novel **The Moviegoer**, Binx Bolling sees a prosperous looking man coming out of a New Orleans church after worship. Binx cannot decide whether the man has come because the church is socially fashionable or because he believes that God is present there. "Or is God there for both reasons?" Binx asks. "Through some dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God's importunate bonus?" He quickly offers his own answer: "It is impossible to say."

It doesn't matter why we have come to worship today. God offers us the wonderful bonus of knowing--if only for a bit of a moment--who God is and who we are and what we must do.