

“SKEPTICAL CONFIDENCE”

Larry Roeming, Preaching

First, let me say that this isn't easy. I've spoken from this pulpit before, though usually in the company of other church members. This is the first time I decided to work from the lexionary. I had to choose from a short list of available scriptures and then figure out what they meant to me, what they might mean to the church, and what relationship they bore to each other, if any. I want to tell you that the Bible is an amazing book, but the lexionary is . . . let's just say a stern taskmaster.

On top of all of that, a number of you told me that you were making a special effort to be here today. And Edward decided that this was such an important event that he had to invite a bunch of friends and relatives. So, I really feel like the heat is on.

Would you join me in prayer. God, may the words that I speak and our collective thoughts and feelings together this morning be acceptable to you. Amen.

A couple of Saturday's ago, I was at a cookout with some of Edward's relatives. Because he had announced that I would giving a sermon today, I decided to tell them a favorite joke about three clergymen. Some of you have probably heard me tell this before, so please bear with me.

There were three ministers talking about how they go about preparing their sermons. The first minister says, "I like to get an early start, so on Sunday afternoon, I begin working on the sermon for the following week; that way I don't feel rushed and I have the rest of the week to really hone in on what I want to say."

The second minister says, "Well, I work better under a bit of pressure, so I start the sermon on Thursday; that gives me two days to look it over and put the finishing touches on it before Sunday morning"

The third minister jumps in and says, "Wait a minute! What are you guys doing during the first hymn?!?!"

When I was done Edward's cousin Frank (who didn't laugh) looked at me quizzically and asked. "So, are you going to give a sermon, or are you going to preach." It took me a minute to realize he was asking if was I going to write something, or if was I going to just wing it. From his point of view, thinking about what to say during the first hymn was as premature as it was unnecessary.

Certainly, the words from Jeremiah would tend to support Frank. After Jeremiah protests God's call, God tells him, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy;' for you shall go to all whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you . . . Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms"

I'm sure that you can think of times in your life when you felt that God wanted you to speak up. To stand up for someone being treated unfairly. Or to join in a protest. Or to disagree with a public official. You probably felt inadequate, as Jeremiah did. You were probably scared, as Jeremiah was. But you knew that to remain silent would be to allow a wrong to go unaddressed.

But in that sort of situation did you actually hear specific words from God? I know that I haven't. So, at those times we feel we should speak, but don't actually hear the voice of God in our ear, how can we be certain that our words really correspond to what God would have us say? Personally, I'm not sure that we can, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't act.

One of the interviews in Bill Moyer's book, "A World of Ideas," is with Dr. F. Forrester Church, senior minister of the All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. In that interview, Church says, "In this day, particularly, if we don't endure quite a bit of ambiguity, we will become rigid and potentially dangerous and tyrannical. The ambiguity here is that we never can finally know what a right decision is.

"The people who frighten me most are the ones who are one hundred percent sure of what's right, and who are hell bent to enforce that on everyone. The people who frighten me almost as much are the people who are sixty percent sure they're right in any given instance, but who can't act because forty percent odds would say they're wrong. These people are all over the country ---- and they are basically not moral actors, they're reactors, and they're timid and unengaged."

Church goes on to suggest, "What we need to do, as best we can, is act on our sixty percent convictions with a hundred percent determination, knowing that at least the odds are that we're right. But when we do act, we must remember, as best we can, that there's a forty percent chance we may be wrong. We're not neutralized in our action, but we're humbled by the possibility of our being wrong."

Of the three ministers in the joke I told, I'm most like the first one. I don't like leaving things until the last minute. Normally, I would have had this sermon prepared at least a week in advance. But as of Tuesday, I only had only written a couple of paragraphs. Every time I tried to begin, something got in the way. Then on Wednesday I found out why God had been holding me back. God may not have put his words in my mouth, but he certainly handed me what I needed on a silver platter.

The project that we were working on that day was about the creation of a theatre piece called "Voices in Conflict" by students at Wilton High School. Some of you may have heard about this, but I knew nothing about it until Wednesday morning. Basically, students in an advanced theatre class decided to create an original play about the war in Iraq using the words of soldiers and others involved ---- much like "The Laramie Project." Relatively early in the semester, the administration of Wilton High School cancelled the show, citing concerns about balance, content, copyright, and the students'

ability to successfully present a “legitimate instructional experience” for the school’s student body.

The school was entirely within its rights to cancel the performance, especially in light of several recent court decisions regarding the free speech rights of students in public schools. Whether you or I agree with the actions of the Wilton High School administration, I assume that they believed that they were doing the right thing. The war is a volatile issue, even among adults, and perhaps high school students would not be able to treat the subject with the gravity that it required. I’m willing to assume that they were acting on at least sixty percent conviction with one hundred percent determination, as Rev. Church would say they should.

In our New Testament Passage from Luke, the leader of the synagogue reminds the people of the law: “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, not on the sabbath day.” He knows the law ---- and it is part of his job to see that the people follow the law. He has a strong conviction and he speaks with determination and authority.

When Jesus responds, he doesn’t argue about what the law says, but he does point out, “Does not each of you, on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water. And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free of this bondage on the sabbath day?” Jesus too speaks with determination and authority.

In Wilton, the students and their teacher (with the support of many of their parents) believed that they had created a work that was powerful, honest, and important. Rather than simply scrap the project on which they had already devoted considerable time and energy, they reworked the play to address some of the administration’s concerns. The revised version was more reflective and less angry, it omitted graphic descriptions of killing, crude language, and some things that reflected poorly on the Bush administration. However, the administration still wasn’t satisfied and declared that they couldn’t perform this new version of the play at the school either.

Unwilling to give up, the students and their teacher began to explore the possibility of performing the work somewhere else ---- at a local church or even in an outdoor venue just beyond school property. The controversy was aired in letters to the editor of the local paper and on the internet, and the story continued to spread. Eventually, the directors of a number of professional theaters contacted the group and offered space to perform the play. Ultimately, the play was performed a total of ten times in three different venues in Fairfield county and off-broadway in New York City.

I believe that the students and their teacher wanted to do the right thing as well. As the controversy escalated, the students were taunted in the school hallways and abused in postings on web blogs. Their teacher risked disciplinary action by the administration. But I’m sure they too were acting on at least a 60 percent conviction with one hundred percent determination.

In the end, what happened has God's fingerprints all over it. If the students and their teacher had not acted on their convictions, the school would probably have enjoyed a passable performance of "You're a Good Man Charlie Brown," or maybe even, "Death of a Salesman." If the administrators had not acted on their convictions, the student body would have been moved by a powerful and compelling theater experience about the war in Iraq, but probably no one outside of the school would have paid much notice.

But I believe God had something greater in mind. Because both sides stood their ground, the lives of this handful of students were changed forever. They learned not only about the war and those who experienced it firsthand, but also about commitment, integrity, courage, and, yes, free speech. It reinforced for them their parents and their teachers willingness to support and fight for them. But not only their parents and teachers, but veterans, theatre professionals, and individuals literally from around the world. And, although I'm a bit ashamed that I hadn't heard it, their story was told via National Public Radio, the Christian Science Monitor, the Los Angeles Times, ABC World News, and hundreds of websites.

More than one of the students we talked with on Wednesday told us that although they didn't agree with the actions of the school administration, they recognized that if the play had not been cancelled by the school, they would not have had the transformative experience which they did. Together, the conflict produced a work of art that may very well be presented throughout the country and which earned the students and their teacher the first-ever "Courage In Theatre Award" from licensing agency Music Theatre International for their perseverance and theatrical ambition.

I'm also convinced that the experience will ultimately provide something valuable and positive to the school's administration as well, though I wouldn't be so arrogant as to guess exactly what God has in mind.

In the passage in Luke, it was the conflict with the leader of the synogogue that made it possible for Jesus to make his point. The leader focused the crowd's attention on what Jesus was doing ---- working on the Sabbath ---- a clear violation of the law. Jesus, in turn, pointed out to the crowd that an unyielding adherence to the law flies in the face of fairness and compassion. In a sense, Jesus is making a point similar to that of Rev. Church. "Yes, there is the law, but if you don't allow for a bit of ambiguity about it, you could become rigid and potentially dangerous and tyrannical."

In the end, I don't think that there is much that is promised to us in this life. We are not promised that there will be no challenges, no difficult decisions to be made, no pain. F. Forrester Church speaks about the "Seven Deadly Virtues," pointing out that we need to be careful of those qualities of which we are most proud. I even heard on National Public Radio that scholars studying some of Mother Theresa's letters have learned that for the last several decades of her life, she was unable to feel the presence of God. She still believed in God, but could not feel God's presense in her life. Despite this existential pain, she continued her work for and with the poor in her country with great determination.

So, where does that leave us? I believe that we must remain skeptical when we encounter too much surety, especially in ourselves. But when we DO feel we are called to do so, act with intelligence, integrity, and, most importantly, love. If we do that, we can be confident that God has something good in store for each of us, for our church, for our community, and for our world.

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