

“The Way of the Prostitute and Tax Collector”

A sermon preached by W. Dale Osborne on September 28, 2008

Lectionary texts used: Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

“People demand freedom of speech as a compensation for the freedom of thought which they seldom use.” That quote from Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, appears at the beginning of today’s Sunday bulletin. Its words set a tone for the noteworthy author that is evident in many of his writings. He was a deeply religious and thoughtful 19<sup>th</sup> century writer who shuddered with “fear and trembling” as he tried to understand and thoughtfully interpret his own faith in God.

That phrase, “fear and trembling” is put forward by the apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Phillippi which we heard just a few moments ago. The end of our reading from Phillippians 2, which was preceded by Paul’s great recollection and interpretation of the powerfully compelling concept of “the mind of Christ Jesus” reads thusly, “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.” Paul sent this letter to the church at Phillippi near the end of his life. In its pages he relates his own love for and dependence on God in Christ so that the readers might be better prepared to face the slings and arrows of persecution that he had already walked through. Paul wanted desperately for the church at Phillippi to seek the mind of Christ and hold fast to the strength that God offered to them through the Holy Spirit. He knew that he could not always be with them but this did not discourage his hopes for their continued existence and peace. Paul clung to his faithful conviction that if the Phillippians could hold fast to the mind of Christ, then they could share in Christ’s suffering as well as Christ’s joy.

I was clearly connected to this passage last week when Dr. Seymour brought his powerful and challenging sermon on the day we celebrated Binkley’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Dr. Seymour reminded us that Binkley is not “Bob Seymour’s” church any more than Binkley is Nettie Wilburn’s or Dave Basile’s church. We are all part of Christ’s church in the world, connected to God and churches around the globe who together are struggling to work out their faith and salvation in the same mode of “fear and trembling” that the apostle Paul and Soren Kierkegaard put forward. We can step forward to do such important work as long as we, like Paul, are willing to take those steps with Christ’s advocacy and leading. Hear again how Paul described it to his beloved friends in Phillippi,

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.*

I want to tell you about a brave woman who has tried desperately to take on the mind of Christ as she has lived out and worked through her faith in God. She is a woman who has been willing to heed Paul’s words by “doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.” This woman, Nora Karmi, has chosen to look not toward her own interests, but to the interests of others in her holy work. Nora Arsenian Carmi is a Palestinian Christian with Armenian roots. Born in Jerusalem a few months before the establishment of the State of Israel, she became a refugee in her own city, Jerusalem, in which she has lived except for periods of study abroad. Nora is connected to the ecumenical and peaceful work of an organization called Sabeel. She has a friend and ally in her work with Sabeel in our own church member Mary Lou Smith. Mary Lou has arranged for Nora to speak at Binkley this coming Tuesday night. Information about her important and timely visit is contained on the gray

insert in your bulletin. Nora, like the apostle Paul and like thousands of courageous Christians before her, is trying desperately to lift up the mind of Christ in our war torn world.

Now let me share with you an excerpt from a magazine called Sojourners. In the magazine's article titled "Fire, Wind and Water", the author, Joyce Hollyday reflects on her encounter with Nora Karmi.

*In Jerusalem's Notre Dame Center, Nora Karmi tells us about life as a Palestinian under occupation. We sit on the border between Arab East Jerusalem and Israeli West Jerusalem. Outside, the Jewish Jerusalem Day commemoration is beginning, a remembrance of Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War. Says Nora, "It's a celebration of something that has created so much suffering." We hear explosions in the street. "They're fireworks," Nora says hastily. "Don't worry. We have learned to differentiate between fireworks and bombs." Fires of celebration and suffering in a land where one person's party is another person's pain.*

Join us this Tuesday night if you would like to know more about God's presence in Palestine through brave women like Nora. The potluck meal begins at 6:30 pm in the fellowship hall and Nora's presentation begins at 7:30 pm in the church lounge.

As I was writing today's sermon on Saturday afternoon in my office, a knock came on my closed and locked office door. When I responded to the knocking, I was met at my now open office door by a man seeking food to feed himself and his wife. What an inconvenience, I initially thought to myself. There was no time for this person's need. Why couldn't John find food at another door at another church somewhere down the road? He had been to my door so many times over the past five to ten years that we knew each other on a first name basis. Then I took a deep breath, shook his hand firmly and walked with him down to our kitchen to look for some sustenance. Hadn't the Jenkins family recently moved to Wisconsin and left the bountiful remains of their own refrigerator freezer in our church freezer? Sure enough, there was meat and vegetables and bread aplenty to share with John and his family on Binkley's behalf. Correction, the food was not shared with John on Binkley's behalf, the food was shared on behalf of Jesus the Christ who taught us so well the path of hunger and healing and reconciliation. The mind of Christ had enabled Kristen Jenkins to faithfully share her food as she left Chapel Hill. The mind of Christ had led John to our church seeking comfort and sustenance. And now, the mind of Christ had enabled me to move beyond irritation and annoyance to a path of openness and connection with John at my door.

Reflecting on this encounter, it felt very much like I had entered into the journey of the first son from Jesus' parable of the vineyard in Matthew's gospel lesson from today. And in so entering that path, aided by my connection to the mind of Christ, I was able to follow the way of the tax collectors and the prostitutes. I was able to follow the way of individual souls who are working out their faith and salvation with fear and trembling as they strive to embrace the teachings of Jesus.

After all, John had knocked on my door. John had asked me to turn away from my self centered path and turn to a different way of seeing the world. This John at my door may very well have been a Baptist. It felt good to listen to John and follow the way of the prostitute and the tax collectors. The kingdom of God is at hand. May Binkley faithfully seek this same path as it moves forward in discerning the mind of Christ in our midst. Paul, Soren, Nora and John are on the journey with us. Thanks be to God for their witness.