

“The Bottom Line”

Children: whose image?

Years ago I heard a story about an Indian tribe who lived in this land, many years before Columbus made his historic voyage. The Indians lived near a swift river in which the current was so strong that no person could cross without being swept downstream and drowned. The day came when another tribe of hostile Indians--much larger and stronger than this group, attacked the village. Before long the tribe was fighting with its back to the river. Since there was no other escape they knew that they must try to cross the swift water. Quickly, they gathered the youngest and oldest members of the tribe--the stronger members placed these on their shoulders and waded out into the rushing waters. Amazingly, the weight of their fellow tribes people on their shoulders helped them to keep their footing and they were able to cross the swift river unharmed.

Church is similar to that tribe: we all need each other. Some are strong, others are weak, no two are alike, but in God's plan all are important, all are needed, all have a place. The common bond for us is the commitment we have made to be a part of the Christian community, and to accept the amazing news that in Jesus Christ God has reached down into the worst muck of human life in order to save sinners, even us! We have claimed Jesus as our Savior, and have promised to let him be Lord of our lives... But it's not always so clear or so easy.... There are days and times when God seems really far away. Cancer, unemployment, problems with our kids, disasters, and the list goes on and on....

God seemed far away to the people in Isaiah's time. Today's reading from Isaiah offered comfort to people whose lives were shaky at best. The Jews knew defeat and hardship; another nation had overpowered them. They had been wondering if God had left them. But today's reading did not include the *first* part of Isaiah 65, which expresses God's anguish: "I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me...I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people...who follow their own devices..." (65:1,2) In other words, the people had shown no concern for God! They had refused to render thanks, praise, or obedience to God. In spite of their failings, God gave them the promise that he would do something new, that some day they would have reason to rejoice. But they had to trust God.

The bottom line is trust. It is a hard line. You probably remember the old illustration of the aerial acrobat in a circus. In order to make it to the next swing, the acrobat must let go of the swing he/she is on *before* the next swing can be caught.. Trust is what makes it possible to make that release. In our lives, in order to trust God, we must let go of our fierce clutches - our anxiety over our problems.

Tony Campolo, in his book, "Carpe Diem," had a wonderful statement. He said that many people go through life "tiptoeing, with no aspiration other than to arrive at death safely." (*Carpe Diem*, Word Publishing, 1994, p. 15, altered by fte) Trust is what makes it possible for us to do more than tiptoe: If we believe that God is present with us, we can make some tough choices to serve

God by standing up for what is right or by reaching out to others.

In Matthew 7:21-28, Jesus offered a harsh challenge after his teachings about faithfulness to God and one's treatment of neighbor. He said, in essence, "Just because you call on God doesn't mean that you're doing what God has told you to do! Be careful to build your life on the Rock of obedience to God!" And in the reading we heard from Luke 20 today, Jesus challenged his hearers to render the things that belong to God to God. All the way through the Bible we are asked to take seriously what is important to God: that we love God, that we love neighbor. Every day, we decide whose image is reflected in our days, our checkbooks, our attitudes? We must choose, every day, to whom are we rendering!

Several years ago I read a first-person account by Christopher Parkening, who gained recognition as an incredibly gifted guitarist during the 1960's. He received a scholarship to USC Berkeley, and at the age of 19 signed a contract with Capitol Records for a series of recordings. Soon he was with Columbia Artists Management and on a concert career, playing concerts throughout the world. The University of Southern California asked him to start a guitar department for them, even while he was still attending school.

In Parkening's own words: "Through my twenties, I was playing ninety concerts a year...I was set on retiring at the age of thirty.... I found a ranch with a beautiful trout stream in ...Montana, and so I moved up there at about the age of thirty. I had everything that I thought would make me happy. I called Columbia Management and Capitol Records and said, 'Thank you. It's been nice, but I found my life's dream, and I don't desire to tour or record anymore.' I also called USC and said I would not teach any more. I didn't play the guitar professionally for the next four years. I had everything..., and yet I still felt empty inside and unfulfilled....

"I went to California to visit some friends and family, and a neighbor happened to lean over a backyard fence and invite me to a Bible-teaching church....The sermon was 'Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith,' from Matthew 7, where Jesus said, 'Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven..'

"When the preacher spoke these words from the Bible, my whole life flashed in front of me. I thought, I am not a Christian! If I stood before Christ, he would say to me, 'You never cared about the things of Christ. You never cared about being obedient to my commands. You never cared about glorifying me with your life or with your music. All you ever cared about was your ranch and your trout stream.'

"I realized that I believed some facts about Jesus Christ... I believed that he was the Son of God....But I never really wanted a Lord in my life. Maybe I wanted a Savior to save me from hell, but I never wanted a Lord in my life that I could follow and trust, and be obedient to. ...That night, I went home, broken over my sins and the emptiness of my life, the wasted opportunities with the guitar, ...the wrong motives. I asked Christ to come into my life, and I remember saying, 'Whatever you want me to do, Lord, I'll do it.'

“From that moment on, I had a great hunger for the Word of God, what scripture said....I came across a passage in I Corinthians (10:31) which said, ‘Whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.’ I made calls to Columbia Artists and Capitol Records, and said, ‘Guess what? I want to start playing the guitar again, but this time for a different purpose.’... So I went back on the road for a different purpose. I had essentially thrown away a valuable career, but by God’s grace He has given that back to me. I think about the myriad of people who are working toward their retirement times when they think they will be happy and fulfilled, but I know now that if you don’t have Christ in your life it is bound to be emptiness. Knowing Christ has given me a deep-down joy and fulfillment and peace, and a purpose for living that I never had before.” (from *Inspired*, by Joanna Laufer and Kenneth S. Lewis, pp. 84-88, edited)

Neat testimony, but sometimes we don’t have a “Now things are so much better” story to tell. Sometimes life makes us wonder whether God really is here and whether God really does care. The Good News is: Yes, God is here, even if my life seems to be in shambles. Yes, God loves me, even if everything seems to be against me! Trusting in God, I will spend the hours of my days trying to do as Jesus would do: I will do my best to love my neighbor and to honor my God.

We are challenged to spend our lives reflecting God's image. The best way to do this is to offer love and forgiveness to other people. We don’t love our neighbor because our neighbor is a nice person or because our neighbor deserves love, or because our neighbor might return love. It may be that our neighbor is *not* a nice person and does not deserve our love--at least by our standards; it may be that our neighbor will not or cannot return our love. We love because we are asked by Jesus Christ to love our neighbor unconditionally. We dare to show love to our neighbor because God first loved us.

Efforts to really follow Jesus may not end up providing us any “brag-able” results. The neighbor may not react well. The cancer may not go away. Life may not suddenly become easy. But if we render to God even in tough times, our lives will be saying YES to God.

Tony Campolo once asked members of a college class, “How long have you lived?” There was silence, until finally one student answered, “Twenty-four years.” Campolo responded, “No! No! I didn’t ask you how long you have existed as a breathing, functioning member of the human race. I wanted you to tell me how long you have been really alive.” " (*Carpe Diem*, Word Publishing, 1994, p. 13)

All of us are needed, all of us have a place. We belong to the One who has given us life in the first place. When we render our lives to God, we will become fully alive, for we will walk with our hearts given to God, and we will offer hope and peace to our neighbors. In the name of Jesus Christ, may it be so! Amen.