

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 14, 2008

09.14 Means of Grace—Fasting/Abstinence & Simplicity

Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Ever tried capturing a wild monkey alive & unharmed? Apparently they've got a really cool way of doing it in the jungles of Africa. "In an extremely humane way, the captors use heavy bottles, with long narrow necks, into which they deposit a handful of sweet-smelling nuts. The bottles are dropped on the jungle floor, & the captors return the next morning to find a monkey trapped next to each bottle.

"How is it accomplished?"

"The monkey, attracted by the aromatic scent of the nuts, comes to investigate the bottle, grabs for the nuts, & is trapped. The monkey can't take its hand out of the bottle as long as it's holding the nuts, but it is unwilling to open its hand & let them go. The bottle is too heavy to carry away, so the monkey is trapped." *(Homiletics)*

That's pretty much the quandry of the spiritual life. To hold on to the sweet things of this world & this life is to be trapped by them. To let go of them may not guarantee freedom but it makes it possible.

The one condition, the three General Rules & the means of grace identified by the Wesleys are simply elements of letting go of world & self in order to find & live in God. Let us review:

One Condition: "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, & to be saved from [our] sins."

Rule #1: "By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind."

Rule #2: "By... doing good of every possible sort, & as far as possible, to all."

Rule #3: "By attending upon all the ordinances of God." *(The Book of Discipline of TUMC, 2004, pg. 48)*

The ordinances of God are six things identified by the Wesleys, commanded in scripture, & that experience has shown are vital to our relationship with God. They are included among the means of experiencing & living through God's grace. One of those is communion. A second ordinance is fasting or abstinence which, along with simplicity as a means of grace, we will learn about today.

Fasting is a means of grace by which we give up something important to us, often food, in order to focus on the One who provides for all of our basic needs, including food. In Matthew 4:2 we find Jesus fasting for 40 days & nights as a means of preparation for his public ministry. He assumed that his disciples would fast, though without making a big show of it. *(Matthew 6:16-18; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 18:12)* He also predicted they would fast out of sorrow when he was gone. *(Matthew 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39)*

Fasting or abstinence may mean letting go of some of the necessities of life for a time (e.g. food, water, shelter, sleep). It may mean letting go of habits or practices that we enjoy (e.g. tv, chocolate, sodas, playing golf or sleeping in on a Sunday morning). Whatever it is, our letting go of it for a time will help us to know just how dependent we are upon God who supplies our every need. We let go of the sweets in the jar & become free to hold on to God.

Simplicity is similar. But the letting go is not just for a time, it's for the long haul. Simplicity means uncluttering our lives so that we make room & time to be with God. It means letting go of distractions so that we might live & grow in God's grace. It means following Jesus'

teaching to be like the lilies of the field, not to worry but to hide our treasures in heaven. ^(Matthew 6:19-34; Luke 12:22-34) It means letting go of the sweets & becoming free to walk with God.

That having been said, there is a kind of fasting, a kind of simplicity, that must be practiced if we are to live the gospel. It involves a kind of letting go that we are all too often loathe to practice because the sweets are simply too sweet, too delicious to release.

It is the fasting & simplicity Paul describes in Romans 14:1-12: a fasting from judgment & condemnation, an abstinence from the need to look down upon others for their weakness of faith, a simple humility as we stand before God, not alone but together.

I find it interesting that in this passage Paul describes those who are weaker in faith as those who are more strict in their observance. They will not eat meat (presumably for fear it might have been offered as part of a pagan sacrifice). They need to stress certain days over others (e.g. high feast days, or Sundays as the day of resurrection). Did you catch that? Paul describes those of us who are here today as being weak in faith!. Would you deny it? I cannot. It is the very reason I am here. I know that my faith is weak. John & Charles Wesley know it, too. It's also why they spent so much time on the one condition, the three General Rules & the means of grace. They knew that as far as faith is concerned we need all the help we can get.

Paul asks why we pass judgment on or despise our sister or brother? Do we not know that all will stand before the judgment, including us? And how would we stand? As though we were saved by worth instead of grace? Would we stand alone, holding at arm's length those we would judge & disdain? Or would we rather stand together, as Christ stands with us, full of grace? Isn't it time we let go? Isn't it time we begin the fast from the sweet smell of self-righteousness? Isn't it time we simply placed our trust in the grace of God for us & for all?

Until we do, the world will not see the church of Jesus Christ as it should be. Even now the world tends to see Christians in general & Evangelicals in particular as feasting on rather than fasting from judgment & intolerance. They hear the loud gongs & the clanging cymbals ^(cf. 1 Corinthians 13) of our church proclaiming that in order to be called Christian—whether as a nation, a church or individually—we must strive to be moral, righteous & pure (& we will pass laws to enforce it). At the same time they hear from us that charity & kindness toward the poor, the hungry, the vulnerable, weak, powerless & oppressed is to remain voluntary (& preferably only if they deserve it).

The world knows the scriptures better than that. It knows that Jesus commands the one, the Pharisees the other. Shouldn't we?

As Christian—whether as a nation, a church, or an individual—should we not practice the love & care for others that Jesus taught? Should we not encourage the good (General Rule #2), discourage that which harms (General Rule #1), & otherwise simply let be? Isn't it time we let go of the sweet smell of judgment, self-righteousness, condemnation & revenge & let the world smell the gospel instead? There are consequences to our choices here, for the nation, church or people who do not practice mercy, love & grace have little hope of teaching it to anyone else. Nor are they likely to find it readily available when they need it.

What is it I would have us do this week? ^(question asked of Bishop Blake by a Texas 6-year-old) Set aside some time to fast. (Check with your doctor if fasting from necessities. Please don't risk your health.) And while we fast, let us consider the depths of God's grace for us & for all.