

## Kicking Butt With Jesus

Although as a student I enjoyed the heat of the debate, protest, and cross-generational ruckus of the Sixties, both in the classroom and on the streets, once in church, I embraced the fantasy that a good church ought to be tranquil. A conflicted congregation is sign of ministerial screw up.

I had to learn that there is crisis, controversy, and quarrelling in the church, among church folks, not only because church people can be difficult (which they often are) and not because pastors are sinners too (of course we are) but because of Jesus Christ the troublemaker he is. Jesus never walked away from an argument; indeed, he initiated most of them.

It's a challenge to establish irrefutable historical evidence for most details of the earthly ministry of Jesus. One thing on which historians enjoy consensus is that Jesus was crucified.? Something about Jesus made government and religious authorities collude to shut him up. From the first, when King Herod heard of Jesus' birth, "he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him" (Matt 2:3).

*Preach the word. Be ready to do it whether it is convenient or inconvenient* (2 Tim 4:1). When you preach for, about, or with rabble rouser Jesus, expect some, well, as Paul puts it, "inconvenience." Some church trouble is due to people being in the pain that comes from being human. Church is personal, relational, and emotional. A high percentage of those with whom we work are beleaguered by physical or mental misfortune. Sometimes they take out their offence about the cards life dealt them by beating up on their pastor. It takes guts to admit your anger at God for life not turning out as you wanted; vent your resentment upon God's field rep.

My theory is that there is unproductive conflict and trivial quarreling in many congregations because they talk only to themselves. Boredom (and an uneasy sense that church is meant to be more than this cozy club) breeds congregational contentiousness. The conflict that validates a church as Christ's is not that of squabbling, miffed church members but the tension provoked by the church colliding with the world's resistance to Christ's reign.

Time and again, as I sat in my study brooding over some ministerial calamity, Jesus has found a way to say, "You're surprised? My sermon turned my home town congregation into a murderous mob. Luke 4. You can look it up. Oh, that's right, you are a graduate of an accredited ATS seminary so you have discovered a way to preach the gospel without getting smacked."

To be honest, some discord within the congregation is not due to them or to Jesus but because of me, my clerical ineptitude. My sin. I say that I'm preaching, or leading, or praying for them when lots that I do is attributable to my own insecurity, pride, presumption and, well, sin.

I failed to appreciate the extent of my deceit, cowardice, vanity, and sloth until my congregation made me look in the mirror of truth, forcing me to admit that though I'm not the biggest sinner, I'm one of the most impressive in this church.

My first ministerial experience was as summer-student-intern-preacher at the Pirateland Family Campground in Myrtle Beach. I kid you not. Preaching to campers on their way to the beach on Sunday mornings. A few years ago I ran across those forgettable sermons from the Summer of '69. In every seaside homily, regardless of the Scripture, I railed against Richard Nixon and the war.

My poor listeners! Dressed for the beach, dragging rafts, coolers, floats and flippers, their one week of vacation, pausing on their way to the strand to speak with God, subjected to my tirades. To my mind, my verbal assault upon Tricky Dick certified me as a genuine "prophet." More likely, it assuaged my anger at God for messing with my future by making me be a pastor. In short, my sermons arose, not from my exegesis, but from my sin.

In hortatory sermons I say, “Hey, here’s how I cured myself of racism. May I help you with yours?”

In 1963 eight Alabama clergy (including one of my episcopal predecessors), white liberals all, casting themselves as peacemakers and reconcilers, wrote to Martin Luther King. While in favor of racial justice, they were troubled by the disruption that King’s followers were causing in Birmingham. They implored King to be more patient and not endanger innocent lives.

From his cell in Birmingham jail, King wrote in the spirit of First and Second Timothy, reminding his fellow clergy that their peace could be a cover for cowardice and sinful accommodation to the powers that be. King kicking butt for Jesus, stirring the pot.

A mimeographed copy of the letter, sent to the city’s clergy that week, adorned my episcopal office in Birmingham. King’s letter on my wall served as potent reminder that powerful, privileged bishops always hope that it’s possible to follow Jesus without trouble.

Thank God a score of African American Methodists refused to dismiss me with, “We know his family; God will never change his mind. Why risk the trouble?”

Because pastors must also be leaders, trouble is unavoidable. Leaders are needed only if an organization must go somewhere (Matt 28). No leadership required if everyone is walking in the same direction. Trouble is, people reward their pastors for preserving the status quo and punish them for making them uncomfortable by stirring the pot.

Leaders make people uneasy by focusing the organization on problems that the institution has ignored for decades, using its best resources to avoid the pain. Leaders risk saying things that the group would rather left unsaid and then curate the arguments that are sure to follow. Pastors hazard the discomfort in faith that Christ will give his church the resources required to be honest about and then creatively to solve, its problems. The leader can always expect conflict between the values people say they hold and the reality they face. Rather than suppress conflict, the effective pastor is courageous enough sometimes to instigate, always to orchestrate conflict so that people may begin to envision new ways of thinking and acting.

The Body of Christ has never faced the truth and bravely attempted to be faithful to the demands of Jesus without conflict and pushback.

Still I say, the main reason the church requires leaders is Christological: Jesus Christ has assigned his mission to the church. Somebody must be called up to convene, equip, train, negotiate, motivate, and send. That’s you.

The best justification for having a church fight is troublemaker Jesus.

How many congregations are one fierce argument away from having a future? A happy church could be a church that’s given up, a congregation that’s degenerated into a like-minded alliance of older adults, a blue, red, or purple political rally rather than a mission outpost for the world’s true sovereign in a warring world. If so, God’s got nobody to stir the pot but you.

I ask my Introduction to Ordained Leadership class, “What will be your greatest ethical challenge as a pastor?” Their most frequent response? “I’m a people pleaser.”

There’s much that these novices don’t know. But if they know that managing conflict will be their chief challenge, they know a great deal.

Thank God I got to enter ministry in a time and place where early on I learned that there are moments when we’ve got to say more than, “Well that’s your opinion; let’s just agree to disagree.” Sometimes a desire for your church to be a “big tent,” or “keep everyone at the table,” is due to a latitudinarian timidity to engage others in arguments about the doctrine you’re supposed to be defending. Jesus warned; he brings peace, but not as the world gives (John 14:27), turning mother against daughter and casting fire on the earth (Lk 12:49-52).

From whence does pastoral courage amid conflict arise? An abiding conviction that the gospel not only makes sense but that it is true. An unshakable faith that Jesus Christ wants us to succeed at being his Body, his Bride, an abiding trust that God will get back what belongs to God. In other words, don't start an argument unless Jesus has egged you on.

Don't you think it revealing that I can tell you who has walked because of disagreement with something that I've said in a sermon. How many more stopped coming, having given up hope that I will say anything of substance to stir their languid spirits?

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