



From the Pulpit: October 17, 2021

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Acts 19:11–20

The (Re)Birth of the Church, VI: Outreach

Lisa Bond says “never waista a good pandemic.” I think what she means by that is don’t waste a crisis as an opportunity to rethink who you are and what God is calling you to be. So the staff has been doing that, trying to think of the rebirth of the church after this pandemic. We’re not without blueprints, we’ve been looking at the story of the church which comes to us from the book of *The Acts of The Apostles* which includes the story from Acts: 19.

I’ve never **heard** a sermon about The Seven Sons of Sceva, so I thought I’d **preach** one. Let me know what you think of this story.

The Sons of Sceva

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them. Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit said to them in reply, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. When this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised.

“Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?” says the demon to the imposter exorcists. Aye!”

Sceva was a high priest of the Greek goddess Artemis, whom the Romans called Diana, the goddess of the hunt, very popular in Ephesus, and when the seven sons of Diana’s high priest Sceva watch Paul heal the sick, chase the demons, and win the hearts of the folk, they say to themselves, “Hey, maybe there’s something to this Jesus business,” and they begin taking on the demons themselves.

They approach one guy who is apparently possessed. Maybe he’s epileptic, or maybe he’s schizophrenic, or maybe he’s one of the unhinged homeless you see shouting incoherencies at innocent pedestrians on the streets of any big city. “In the name of the Jesus whom Paul proclaims, I ad-

jure you to come out,” they ritually chant at the demon messing with this guy’s mind.

And then another great example of Luke’s wry sense of humor; this is funnier than Eutychus falling asleep and out the window during Paul’s interminable sermon in Troas. This single schizophrenic, this one lonely lunatic, goes on a rampage and overpowers all seven sons of Sceva till they run screaming from the scene. “Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?” says the demon to the seven sons of Sceva.

You see what’s happening, right? This exorcism doesn’t work because these imposters are pretending. They don’t know anything about Jesus of Nazareth. They’re counterfeits, and the forces of darkness always know this about the pretenders.

“**Jesus** I know, and **Paul** I know, but who are **you?**” says the demon to the imposter exorcists. Aye! There’s a sermon in that question, isn’t there? Do the demons know us?

Now, don’t get thrown off by this story’s archaic vocabulary and obsolete metaphors. When we come upon the word ‘demon’, let’s read “whatever in our present world is dark and sinister and ugly and untoward and evil.”

Those unseen forces that cripple human life are sometimes so large and so inexorable and so inscrutable and so inchoate, that when the Bible wants to talk about them, it often uses this spooky, ancient word ‘demon.’

The point is: do the powers of evil in our world know who we are? Jesus they know, and Paul they know, but do they know us?

Last week we talked about **Inreach**, that introverted aspect of our ministry by which we care for our own, the people we know, the people we love. This week I want to talk about Outreach, that aspect of our ministry by which we try to minister to everybody else. The Church exists for those who are not members of it. **YET.**

Every congregation’s Outreach should have two aspects. It must include both **Charity** and **Justice**. Outreach must be **micro** and **macro**. Outreach must be **local** and **global**. Outreach must **personal** and **social**. **Charity** is Outreach at the personal level. It issues from the individual heart transformed under the influence of the Nazarene. With our charity we become philanthropists who are both **generous** and **wise**. We give till it hurts a little bit and we give to agencies that we are sure will leave the world a fairer, finer, lovelier place.

“So Charity is Outreach at the personal level. But Justice is Outreach at the social level.”

One of the reasons I accepted your call to be your pastor seven years ago was that I learned that every year you gave away \$500,000 to people you don’t even know. That’s extraordinary for a church like ours. You know, to be fair about it, some of our ministries are supported by the generosity of past generations. Some of it is given by dead people. That’s okay. When we die, we’ll also leave a pile of money to this church so that our great-grandchildren can give it away in 2075.

One of the greatest, most genius congregational stewardship projects I’ve ever heard about was your gift to Gil and Marlene Bowen when they retired 14 years ago. You didn’t give it to Marlene and Gil. You gave it so that Marlene and Gil could function as servants of Jesus and brilliant stewards of God’s money. I don’t even know how much you gave them in 2007, something like \$3 million?

Gil and Marlene have been giving it away like crazy for 14 years, but they can’t spend it fast enough. It’s still \$3 million and will be funding worthy agencies for generations to come.

Our own Kenilworth Union Trustee Scott Bondurant teaches a course every year at Northwestern University called “History of Investing.” Great course. Scott quotes Albert Einstein to his students every year. Albert Einstein said, “The greatest miracle in the history of the world is...what? General Relativity? Special Relativity? No. Dr. Einstein says the greatest miracle in the history of the world is compound interest. The Bowen Fund is an example of that miracle.

And the agencies Kenilworth Union and the Bowens give the money to: Night Ministry, Refugee One, Sarah’s Circle. You think the Demons of Poverty and Homelessness and Ignorance know their names? Those Demons don’t say to those agencies “**Jesus** I know, and **Paul** I know, but who are **you?**” Those forces of darkness know those names.

So **Charity** is Outreach at the **personal** level. But **Justice** is Outreach at the **social** level. Charity addresses the **effects** of poverty, inequality, and ignorance. But Justice, Outreach on the **social** level, addresses the **causes** of poverty, inequality, and injustice. Social justice is at least as important as personal charity for every Christian congregation.

William Sloane Coffin used to talk about “the pallid, pinched, pygmy world of private piety.” You see what he means, yes? Prayer, Bible Study, Divine Worship, Charity, are all wonderful things, but our Religion must be macro, global, and extroverted, addressing both the causes and the effects of injustice.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “Any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of human beings and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that can scar the soul is a moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried.”¹

Does the Demon of Environmental Destruction know our name? We have a Green Team. It’s a start. Does the Demon of Racism know our name? We have a Racial Justice Commission. It’s a start.

What is the church for if not for the promotion of social justice? A while back a few of us read this book called *Hitler’s Pope*, about Eugenio Pacelli, who became Pope Pius XII in 1939 and is now world famous for what he did not do and did not say.

In September of 1941, Hitler forced every Jew to wear the yellow star. In November of 1941 Joseph Goebbels said, “Every Jew is our enemy.” In 1942 the Final Solu-

tion began with death trains to Auschwitz and Treblinka, and still Pius was silent. The few public comments about the holocaust he was able to muster were bland and harmless. Benito Mussolini famously, derisively scoffed at the banal and timid pronouncements unleashed by the Vicar of Christ.²

Did the demon of Nazism know Pius’ name? Not a chance! “**Jesus** I know, and **Paul** I know, but who are

you?” said Hitler to Pius. “Only those who speak out for the Jews,” said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “have a right to sing Gregorian chant.”

Do you know the fine film *Amazing Grace*, about William Wilberforce, the well-heeled member of the British Parliament who after a patient, relentless, nineteen-year struggle, finally succeeded in putting an end to the slave trade in England in 1807?

William Wilberforce was an evangelical Christian, very religious, very pious, significantly influenced by John Newton, the ex-slave-trader who wrote the famous hymn. Wilbur loved to sing. He especially loved to sing “Amazing Grace.”

Early in his political life, when he was tempted to retreat from public policy into the pinched, pallid world of private piety, his best friend, future Prime Minister William Pitt, on hearing him once again sing “Amazing Grace,” asked, “Wilbur, do you intend to use your beautiful voice to praise the Lord, or to change the world?”

Wilbur chose the latter. Praising the Lord is a wonderful thing, but changing the world: that’s what we’re here for.

Jesus I know, and **Paul** I know, but who are **you?**

“Any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of human beings and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that can scar the soul is a moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried.”
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., in a 1960 speech at a fair employment conference.

² John Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope* (New York: Viking, 1999).

—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Christine V. Hides

God of wisdom, God of love, God of extraordinary miracles,

With thanks for each blessing you have given us: the gift of life, the comfort of family and friends, the provision for our daily needs, we come to you in prayer.

For your Church, Christ's hands and feet in this world, your people who serve humbly and who lead boldly, Holy God, we pray that all might know of your love and mercy, through the faithful ministries of the church.

For the nations of the world, for communities in need, for places where violence is too common, for those who are working tirelessly to provide sanctuary for refugees, for the wisdom of elected leaders around the globe, Merciful God, we pray that true peace that passeth understanding be made known.

For the beauty of the earth, for woods and wetlands, deserts, and deserted beaches, for the mysterious ocean depths, for the grandeur of the mountain peaks, Creator God, we pray that the world's resources might be preserved for future generations and employed for the common good.

For those in our community who are in need, for the unemployed, the overworked, and the uninsured; for those who struggle to secure food and shelter; for those facing any kind of physical or mental illness, for those who have lost hope, for those who grieve and mourn, for all who have entrusted their heartfelt prayers and petitions to this congregation, for every concern we carry with us today, named out loud or held silently in our hearts, Loving God, we pray.

In the presence of your Spirit, in faith and trust, we lift our hearts to you O God, as we pray the prayer your Son Jesus Christ teaches...Our Father....

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