

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

11/7/10

A Community of Grace

Zechariah 7:9

Some years ago I had the experience of attending lectures given by a brilliant but cantankerous Baptist preacher name Carlyle Marney. I will never forget how he described in his deep, resonant, North Carolina voice how he learned about grace. It was what people did for him when he almost died in the hospital which gave new meaning to that word for him. He learned more about grace in one week than he had learned in three years of Seminary. It was when he had absolutely no control over his life that grace came alive for him. He came to understand grace as the presence of God breaking into our most desperate moments.

It was this insight that guided Marney in a response that he was reported to have given to a question posed by a student at a small church related college.

When a student asked, ‘Dr. Marney, would you say a word or two about the resurrection of the dead?’ Marney replied, ‘I will not discuss the resurrection with people like you; I don’t discuss such things with anyone under 30. Look at you all; in the prime of life. Never have you known honest-to-God failure...or the brick wall of mortality. You are extremely apt and handsome...so what can you know of a world that makes sense only if Christ is raised (Kyle Childress, *Christian Century*, November 2, 2010, page 20).

Marney was no doubt exaggerating for effect. But he clearly understood the difficulty of speaking of the resurrection to people who don’t have a clue about the crucifixion.

This insight was at the heart of Jesus’ response to a question about the resurrection in the 20th chapter of Luke. Jesus has completed his last journey to Jerusalem. He has driven the money changers out of the temple and this leads to a series of challenges to his ministry. The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders begin by demanding that Jesus establish his credentials. When that doesn’t work they send some operatives who try to trap Jesus over the issue of paying taxes to Rome. When this attempt fails, it is the turn of the Sadducees to try to humiliate Jesus.

They come to Jesus with a truly bizarre question about the resurrection. They give an obscure interpretation of the law of Moses about a woman marrying in turn seven brothers and then outliving all of them. They want Jesus to tell them whose wife she will be in the life to come. The Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection and they want to make Jesus look stupid because he does. Jesus understands that the question does not come from people who are struggling with the issue of life after death. The minds of the Sadducees are closed on this subject. They are simply looking for a fight.

Jesus chooses not to answer the question. Instead he challenges the assumed world that lies behind it. The questioners assume that if there is a resurrection the woman must belong to someone in it. Jesus lived in a world where husbands had property rights over their wives. The Sadducees assume that the resurrection world will be no different. But Jesus’ response to the Sadducees makes clear that the resurrection is not about ownership or control. It is about grace for those who are up against the brick wall of mortality.

Jesus has a very different conversation about the resurrection with Martha in John's gospel. She was overcome with grief over the death of her brother Lazarus. Her world had been destroyed and she was desperate for a word of grace. It is to Martha that Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die will live... (John 11:25)." This is the message that Martha needed to hear. It is the word of grace that Jesus wants us to share with those who are broken by grief.

The prophet Zechariah set a similar task before his people in the aftermath of a historical catastrophe. In the 7th chapter of Zechariah we find the people of the city of Bethel coming to the prophet with a question. For seventy years they have practiced a month of fasting and mourning because of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Seeing that the reconstruction of the temple is almost completed the people are asking if this annual observance should continue. But the leaders of the community do not know how to end the practice. It has become such an integral part of their civic life no one can imagine how to function without this observance. Many of them hope the prophet will tell them that God does not want them to walk away from this tradition.

When the question comes to Zechariah he refuses to give a direct answer. Instead he challenges the assumptions that undergird this religious practice. He points out that their festivals of mourning were never for the benefit of God. For seventy years they have indulged in self pity. They have been so preoccupied with a tragedy of the past they have not been attentive to the work that God calls them to do in the present. The prophet spells out their responsibility in these words, "Thus says the Lord of hosts...show kindness and mercy to one another (Zechariah 7:9)." God never called them to be a community of mourning. God wants them to be a community of grace. They are to offer God's word of hope and comfort to those who are up against the brick wall of mortality.

Last week Barbara and I were away on a one-week vacation. I can never leave Springfield without some concern about what may happen when I am not here. This was one of those times when a member of this church and a good friend died while I was away. I always feel a particular pain of regret when I am not present at such a moment. But these experiences also give me the opportunity to be thankful for the competence of my colleagues and the capacity of this congregation to minister to people who are confronted by death. It was obvious to me from long-distance that this church was living up to its calling last week.

Elaine Pagels has written of the crisis that came to her family when they learned that her two year old son was terminally ill. She had not been a churchgoer. But a few days after finding herself up against the brick wall of mortality she was visiting a local church. She later described her presence there in these words:

Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there...Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon your child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine...Here is a family that knows how to face death (quoted by John M. Buchanan, *Christian Century*, June 15, 2010, page 3).

I am blessed to be part of a family that knows how to face death. In this church the resurrection is not an abstract principle. It is a dynamic force that shapes our life as a community of grace.