

REFLECTIONS ON JEREMIAH WRIGHT

I Peter 1:3-9

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on March 30, 2008, Second Sunday of Easter, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

I Peter 1:3-9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

As I was developing my preaching style in the 1980s and early 1990s, there were three persons whose tapes I would purchase and play as I drove from hospital to hospital or town to town.

One was Fred Craddock, the dean of what is called “narrative preaching,” who taught at Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

Another was that great secular preacher – Garrison Keillor.

The third was Jeremiah Wright, recently retired Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ on the south side of Chicago, a person who has burst into public view the past three weeks.

- I learned of Jeremiah Wright when I began working on my Doctor of Ministry at McCormick Seminary in Chicago in 1987.
- Over the next few years, I worshipped at his church three or four times.
- I bought and listened to probably a dozen tapes over an eight to ten year period.
- I heard him preach at two preaching conferences in the late 1990s, and on a quick trip to Atlanta, in which I saw the Atlanta Braves defeat the Cleveland Indians 1-0 to clinch the 1995 World Series, I was able the next morning to hear Jeremiah Wright preach as guest minister at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

II.

I gleaned several things from my limited but significant exposure to his preaching over a ten year period:

First, Jeremiah Wright was both sound and lively in his exegesis of scripture.

- In a Mother’s Day sermon, called “What’s Goin’ On?” Wright preached about Hagar,¹ and, ironically on Mother’s Day, called the men in his congregation not to abandon the children they had fathered (as Abraham had abandoned Hagar and Ishmael), but instead to marry the mothers of their children, to work, to pay child support where marriage was not in order, and to be a significant parental presence in their children’s lives.

¹ Genesis 16:1-15; 21:8-21.

- In another sermon, Wright read one of the most powerful passages of scripture, Romans 8 – “If God be for us, who can be against us?” – in the voice of a chaplain walking next to a condemned prisoner being led to the electric chair: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life...nor principalities, nor powers...shall separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.” It was one of the most powerful uses of scripture I have ever heard in a sermon.²
- From Jeremiah Wright I have inherited two phrases from which have shaped my ministry:
 - “The church is the only militia in the world which shoots its wounded.”
 - “The doors of the church are open!”

Though I have only shaken Wright’s hand at the door of his church, part of the reason I am the preacher I am – for better or worse – is Jeremiah Wright.

Second, in my limited observation, Jeremiah Wright created a congregation which brought the Christian faith to intense life and deep relevance to African-Americans in one of the most besieged urban neighborhoods of our nation.

- It appears to me that he did this through restoring in the hearts of children, youth, and adults, a sense of pride in their roots in Africa, a sense of commitment to Jesus Christ, a belief that they are indeed children of God, and a desire to make the best of the many opportunities life in America presents.
- At one service I attended, during the announcements, pastoral concerns, and music preceding the service, Wright called forward a dozen or so children who had received “A’s” on their most recent report cards and gave each a certificate.

I have never listened to one of his tapes, attended one of his services or sat through one of his lectures without coming away wiser, more inspired, or both.

II.

So you can imagine that I have followed the publicity around some of his preaching and statements with more than a passing interest as yet another turn in an intensely fought primary election.

What is my current assessment of Wright; and what does this moment teach us? Three things I want to share.

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First, a practical lesson.

No matter what good Jeremiah Wright has done for the Christian faith, he will be remembered for inflammatory and incendiary statements that have been shown time and time again on cable television and are available on the Internet via a few clicks.

This incident reminds us that the technology we have today renders virtually anything we write or say as available for public consumption. Any words we say, or any photograph taken with our without our permission, can determine how we will be remembered by all but a handful of people who know us well.

If you are a child or a teenager, be very careful about anything you send over the Internet, no matter how funny you think it is today. Be careful about anyone you allow to take your picture. Be careful about being any place where you might be photographed or recorded without your knowledge. Unfortunately, you may never live it down.

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Second, a theological lesson.

Jesus Christ takes shape for us in the historical circumstances in which we live. Jesus Christ is God Incarnate – God “in the flesh.” In the words of the Gospel of John, Christ literally “pitches his tent” in our midst.³

² I am sharing here what I remember and gleaned from both of these sermons. I no longer have the tapes and as far as I can tell, they are not available online. These passages of the sermon are more accurate concerning my memory than what may actually have been said.

³ In John 1:14, “the Word became flesh and lived among us,” the literal translation of “lived among us” is “pitched his tent.”

Whether we live in one of the most highly educated and wealthiest congressional districts in the nation, as we do; or in one of the most decimated areas of the South Side of Chicago; or in the midst of war and tribal violence as do our brothers and sisters at Moi's Bridge in Kenya – Jesus Christ takes shape where we are.

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In the lectionary passage today, the author of The First Letter of Peter writes to Christians who are living as a minority, some of whom are persecuted as slaves, some of whom live with abusive spouses, all of whom live as aliens in the culture in which they reside. The writer tells them:

Although you have not *seen* Christ
You love him;
And even though you do not *see* him now
You *believe* in him and rejoice
With indescribable joy,
For you are receiving the outcome of your faith,
The salvation of your souls.

First Peter is often rightly criticized for calling Christian slaves to obey their masters and Christian women to obey their men.⁴ But one of my other homiletical tutors, Tom Long,⁵ says that the message within even these often misused passages is this:

When you are in a situation
In which you have no power,
When all you can see is
What somebody else is doing *to* you:
Know that the eye isn't telling the whole truth;
The eye doesn't have the final word;
The eye doesn't win.
No matter *what* somebody else is doing to you,
They cannot take away from you
The faith you have been given,
The salvation which is yours.

The task of each of us as individuals – and for us as a community – is to determine how Jesus Christ is formed in our lives; to determine how “God made flesh” has “pitched his tent” in our historical circumstances. What I witnessed in my few times at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, to the best of my judgment, was Christ taking shape in the lives of women and men, girls and boys, in that community. From what I observed, the church and minister under so much fire today have done a good job – overall – in determining how Christ has taken form in their historical circumstances.

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Third, a psychological and political lesson.

What you and I have seen from Jeremiah Wright these past three weeks is about sixty seconds of rage:

- Rage against slavery and its legacy
- Rage accusing the CIA of inventing AIDS and infecting Africans
- Rage against America for our support of Israel
- Rage against America as being a cause of 9/11.

From what we have seen of the videos, and from longer portions of the sermons I have read via a CNN website,⁶ Wright's rage is palpable, eloquent, and fiery.

⁴ I Peter 2, 3, and 4.

⁵ Tom Long gave this assessment of I Peter in his verbal comments on a paper on I Peter 1:3-9 at the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminary in January 2008.

The Bible itself contains numerous expressions of rage.

- The prophets rage *against* the people of Israel⁷ *and against* those who wage war on them.⁸
- Job rages against God,⁹ as does the psalmist.¹⁰
- Paul rages against the Galatians,¹¹ and Jesus drives money changers out of the temple,¹² curses a fig tree,¹³ and denounces the scribes for wearing long liturgical robes and claiming the best seats in the synagogues while devouring widows' houses.¹⁴

Sometimes rage is based in historical reality; sometimes, in fantasy and conspiracy. Often, for the health of individuals rage must be expressed, so healing and new life can develop.

But the expression of rage is best done in a place where someone who is beyond rage can take charge. That is one reason I believe the psalms invite us to take our rage to God. On the other hand, when a leader expresses rage – whether that leader is as pastor, a coach, a parent, or a college president – the expression of rage must be well thought out, limited in scope, and targeted at something obviously true. Otherwise it becomes demagoguery.

The sins that Jeremiah Wright has committed are many:

- Conspiratorial charges that have little or no grounding in reality
- Virulent condemnation of his own nation in one of its darkest and most vulnerable moments
- Harsh and incendiary language that is profane and perverse.

Behind these sins, the deepest is that which the medievals called “simony,” the misuse of ecclesiastical office. As a brilliant preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Jeremiah Wright allowed the rage in his heart to be expressed when he needed – and his community needed for him to be – the adult in the room. Jeremiah Wright took himself out of a position of leadership when he chose to become a nearly unbridled voice of rage. It may have been cathartic for him and his hearers, but it didn't lead anywhere positive.

Given all the good that this preacher of the gospel has done during the course of his lengthy ministry, it is a personal tragedy that his retirement years will be marked by the ill repute of history's judgment. Jeremiah Wright will now likely play only a small and unremembered part in the long march our nation will continue to make through the “unfinished work”¹⁵ of overcoming “the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil,”¹⁶ of ensuring that “government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

Amen.

⁶ See Roland Martin, “The full story behind Wright's “God damn America” sermon,” March 21, 2008, available at <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/2008/03/21/the-full-story-behind-wright%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cgod-damn-america%E2%80%9D-sermon/>; see also Martin, “The full story behind Wright's 9/11 sermon,” March 21, 2008, available at <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/2008/03/21/the-full-story-behind-rev-jeremiah-wrights-911-sermon/>. I advise you to read these transcripts and determine whether or not you think his comments have been taken out of context.

⁷ Amos 5:21-24.

⁸ Isaiah 13:1-22.

⁹ Job 6 and 7.

¹⁰ Psalm 42:9-10.

¹¹ Galatians 3:1.

¹² Mark 11:15-19.

¹³ Mark 11:12-14, 19-25.

¹⁴ Mark 12:38-30.

¹⁵ Abraham Lincoln, *The Gettysburg Address*, November 19, 1863, available at <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>.

¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865, available at <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html>.