

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 3, 2010
Lessons: Isaiah 57:15-19 and John 1:1-18

THE DIFFERENCE ON THE GROUND

Picture the war room as in movies, with generals gathered around a table or screen on which the campaign is modeled to give them the “big picture” so they can strategize. Suppose we move this armored division from here to there. Suppose we send infantry into that sector. The generals, being soldiers, are painfully aware that their choices in the model will be experienced quite differently on the ground where actual human beings will do the killing and dying. No general worthy of the rank ever forgets the realities of warfare on the ground, but to win, the strategists of war must move people around like chess pieces, knowing they are “playing” with the lives of the grunts whose duty is expressed in this famous stanza from Tennyson’s poem, “The Charge of the Light Brigade”:

'Forward, the Light Brigade!
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldiers knew
Some one had blunder'd:
Their's not to make reply,
Their's not to reason why,
Their's but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

I’ve been reading of an increasing number of teachers and in-school administrators in public education who see themselves as grunts struggling in the trenches as remote, top-down managers seek to reform education from models that deny the validity of powerful forces acting upon children because the educational system cannot control those forces. But it’s not just in education and the military that we encounter this perhaps inevitable but often bitter distinction between those viewing the big picture and those trying to carry out their orders on the ground. All large human systems operate this way because we have found no other. Real hardship comes when those who think they see the big picture lose respect for the grunts and start dismissing contemptuously the very real human problems those grunts face every day. The more distance, both intellectual and emotional, between the planners and the doers, the greater the problems on the ground and more damaging the failures. I suspect this recession has increased considerably the number of people who feel like grunts.

We have just celebrated another Christmas, the holiday some promoters of Christianity get exactly backwards. People in the pews seem to sense that something very human happened when Jesus was born, but the would-be generals gathered in Christianity's war rooms just don't get it and for two thousand years have refused to "get it" because so much power and glory have depended upon their not getting it.

What is the Incarnation? God's Son became a grunt. The glory of God hit the ground of earth and made it's home here with us. The Gospel of John says, literally, he "tented among us." Tented. Pitched his tent among ours in the field. Yes, the reference is to the Older Testament's Tent of Meeting, where God spoke with Moses who in turn spoke with the people, but let's not reverse the meaning of that reference. It is in the life and person of this grunt – this man without prestige or power – that we are encountered by the glory of God. The truth of his coming must be kept human; otherwise the Incarnation is wiped away and nothing changes here on the ground.

John says the glory of God is revealed to us as "grace and truth." Let's start with truth. However high-flying and theoretical truth may seem in our Western thought, in the Bible it is a relational term that speaks of reliability and trust. We use that meaning in our expression "true friend" — the one you can count on to understand and care, to stick with you through thick and thin even to the point of self-sacrifice. That's the kind of truth which is the glory of God: love's truth. Grace is "steadfast love" that remains loyal to the relationship even when we human beings violate it or turn our backs on it. Again, this glory of God's Word belongs to love rather than power or majesty. The more we make Jesus majestic, the further we move away from the truth of God he has brought us in person. The more Christianity seeks power, the more corrupt and un-Christlike it becomes. The more we Christians try to dictate to our host society and demand privilege for our faith, the further we move our faith away from Jesus. He will stay with the people. We cannot take him from them; we can only remove ourselves and our churches, leaving him behind and taking with us a corrupted Christ who is not Jesus at all.

Martin Luther gave to the Protestant churches the great declaration of our hope and salvation: *sola gratia*, as he put it, which means "by (God's) grace only." John Calvin, the forefather of our Presbyterian and Reformed branch of Protestant Christianity, kept Luther's declaration and even strengthened it. In our Reformed faith, God's grace is always primary; God's love comes first and foremost. Even our faith in Jesus Christ is a gift, a response kindled within us by God's love and promise of salvation. It is never my faith upon which my life depends but always and forever God's grace. My faith is not strong enough or pure enough, but God's love holds even when my faith slips.

Yet, even within Calvin's own thought and more so in the thinking of his followers, there lies a danger that I have come to see more clearly in the past few years. Grace is defined as love undeserved, forgiveness given without obligation, favor we have not earned and cannot. True, but sometimes our tradition emphasized the undeserving more than the love. We made God's absolute freedom from obligation to us seem more important than God's great love for us. That's a serious mistake that runs contrary to the Incarnation of God's Word. The greater truth and more prominent message we share must be God's love, God's eagerness to embrace and redeem; otherwise, we turn cold and draw back from Jesus' compassion for this world's people.

Here's the human analogy. The person who loves another deeply commits to that other person's well-being freely and wholeheartedly but must not be taken for granted. Love is not taken as a payment the other person is obliged to make but received thankfully as a gift. But the first truth is, "I love you," not, "I don't have to love you unless I choose to." The love is primary, even though its freedom must be respected. So, it is also with God. The truth that we can in no way obligate God to love us or care about our salvation matters only because God does love us so deeply and is utterly committed to our salvation. No, we can't obligate God, but God is never indifferent toward us or unconcerned with our struggles and immune to our hurts. By making God's independence seem the greater truth, we have made God appear cold and uncaring, and nothing could be further from the truth of Jesus Christ. The message is, "For God so loved the world," not, "God really didn't care much but decided to drop in anyway." People need to know how much God cares.

Top-down management may have its place in human society, but God's ways are not our ways, and because God's truth is love, the individual is not expendable to the greater good. The shepherd goes out into the night to seek the one sheep that wandered off. The lost one must be found, the shamed restored, the alienated brought home, the crushed raised up. The truth of God operates on the ground, not in the war room. The grunts are sisters and brothers of the Son of God, who knows the realities of their lives and will not abandon them.

We have a message to share, but it is not a grand scheme, a top-down plan imposed upon us by a distant God. The new way we need to go as Christians in a secularized and diverse society we no longer dominate is the way of Jesus. It is incarnational — on the ground. It is grace shared, not authority imposed. Grace is not a temporary concession to human weakness, the short-term offer of a second chance to get it right, but is, rather, the way in which Jesus has called us to walk with him all along. We are to follow him in his way of humble service, because that's his kind of glory — back then, now, and forever.

The year 2009 was rough all around. I hope in this new year we will be able to make progress on the ground, sharing the grace we are given. Amen.