



A Note from the Pastor's Corner

Recently, I received this in an e-mail.

“If you cross the North Korean border illegally you get 12 years hard labor. If you cross the Iranian border illegally you are detained indefinitely. If you cross the Afghan border illegally, you get shot. If you cross the Saudi Arabian border illegally you will be jailed. If you cross the Chinese border illegally you may never be heard from again. If you cross the Venezuelan border illegally you will be branded a spy and your fate will be sealed. If you cross the Cuban border illegally you will be thrown into political prison to rot. If you cross the US border illegally you get: a job, a drivers license, social security card, welfare, food stamps, credit cards, subsidized rent or a loan to buy a house, free education, free health care, a lobbyist in Washington, billions of dollars worth of public documents printed in your language, the right to carry your country’s flag while you protest that you don’t get enough respect, and, in many instances, you can vote.”

Of course, it was all in bold, upper case letters – indicating that it’s a rant. Ignoring the fact that it’s got more than a few distortions, I couldn’t help but notice that it came from a person who often forwards what I refer to as “Christian rant” e-mails – similar in tone as this, but full of “Christian nation” / “under God” proclamations and moans about the terrible persecution Christians are suffering in this nation.

So, I responded with this: “Isn’t wonderful that we were fortunate enough to be born in a nation like this and not in one of the ones you mentioned?” So far, I’ve heard nothing in reply.

Now, I used to work with this person and know his temperament, which is why I simply stuck with the content of the forwarded diatribe. In the past, I brushed this kind of stuff off. But I observe it being more and more common – “it” being the seeming ability to hold two entirely different beliefs in one’s mind at the same time and not being affected by the conflict.

“What are the entirely different beliefs?” you may be asking. Let me respond with a question or two of my own. First, what does it mean to be a Christian? (I’ll leave the ‘Christian nation’ thing go for now. Becoming Christian is an individual experience, is it not?) Does it mean to love your neighbor – or to show them hatred? Does it mean to minister to the oppressed – or to oppress them even more? Does it mean to welcome the stranger – or to completely ignore them? Does it mean to treat them with dignity as Jesus would – or to scorn and dishonor them? Were the many prophets of God who tried to remind the people to not oppress the alien, the widow, or the orphan just joking around?

How many times does a person have to hear (or, perhaps, read) the various accounts of Jesus ministering to the physical needs of the rejected sinner, of the hated foreigner, of the outcast rule-breaker, and of the oppressed stranger before we actually understand that Jesus wasn’t kidding around? Believe it or not, he was giving us as many examples as he could of what he expects *our* lives to be about!

The way I understand the Jesus of the Gospels, the sentiments in that e-mail I received represents everything that he worked his entire earthly life to reverse in the world. He lived in a culture much like ours – one with an abundance of public displays of outward religiosity but with attitudes that revealed hearts as cold and hard as stone. People loved his healings. But they hated Jesus for what he preached, because his words forced them to see the reality of who they were – that their claim to be people of God was as empty as their words.

Claiming to be an apprentice of Jesus while, at the same time, harboring the above attitudes (not to mention actually expressing them) is to claim two totally opposing realities at the same time. This cognitive dissonance would ordinarily result in an inner conflict – which, if not relieved in some way, could go so far as to lead to a psychotic break. The stronger one clings to each diametrically opposed belief, the greater that internal tension becomes. This conflict can be relieved by letting go of one belief, or by personally redefining one of them so it is in agreement with the other.

I believe we live in a nation where large numbers of people have chosen to redefine what it means to be a Christian. I also believe my former work associate is one such person, seeming to define the term ‘Christian’ to mean a militant, nationalistic, self-centered, self-focused person that doesn’t much care about the question, “Who *is* my neighbor?”

Believe me, I understand what it’s like to be immersed in this society. And I know how difficult – and important – it is to rise above it all. Jesus never said that being salt and light would be easy. In fact, he said it would be hard on us. And that is the challenge for us all.

Grace and peace, Pastor Bud