

The Sophist's Abandon

a sermon based on 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

(with reference to Luke 6:17-26 and Jeremiah 17:5-10)

and delivered on
February 17, 2019
6th Sunday after Epiphany (Year C)

at
Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

Copyright © 2019 Rev. Mark A Harkness

Do any of you remember the logic problems from school? For instance:
All apes are primates.
All gorillas are apes.
Therefore, all gorillas must be primates.

Logic is a means by which we take things that we do know – put them together – so that we can know something we didn't already know or didn't know directly. These may be things we suspect – but not things with which we have direct experience or knowledge.

In the passage that we just heard from 1 Corinthians, St. Paul asks, “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor 15:12) It's not logical. Is it? If there is NO resurrection – then there is NO resurrection including for Christ. “(And),” as Paul says, “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.” (1 Cor 15:14) He doesn't leave it there, he rephrases it trying to make the point that there is a flawed logic. A logic that can only be true if he is lying about God. His exact words are “We are even found to be misrepresenting God,” (1 Cor 15:15a) which might sound a little bit nicer than lying, but that's the effect.

The reason you don't get it, Paul is saying, is because your logic is flawed.
Let's go back to that logic problem.

All apes are primates. Yes?

All gorillas are apes. Yes?

Therefore, all primates must be gorillas. No?

We know that isn't so. And because we know that isn't so, we might be tempted to abandon all of what we hear. We could end up dismissing all of this talk about primates and apes and gorillas as a mere lie, rather than a flaw in our logic.

As Christians we make some rather bold claims. We claim that God – in the Son – became human born of a virgin. We claim that God – in the Son – died on a cross for our sake and that he rose from the dead and lives forevermore. That's pretty bold stuff.

It's fantastic stuff. Fantastically wonderful, but also sounding a quite a bit like a fantasy. We need to admit that. Someday, I'll preach my “Apostolic Apology” sermon here where I share evidence that confirms that “fantasy” as reality. But we do need to admit that what we proclaim isn't as obvious to others who don't know what we know by our experience with the living God, by our hope in Jesus Christ, and our ongoing experience through the Holy Spirit.

Our God offers hope. He offers promise. He offers healing. He offers life. But a lot of people don't know that. Either they haven't had all the same experiences to put together logically; or something impedes their logic.

Many of you may know that I'm a Rotarian. The four-way test for Rotary Club members says, “of the things we think, say and do we ask: First, is it the truth? Second, is it fair to all concerned? Third, will it build goodwill and better friendships? Fourth, will it be beneficial to all?” Those are all good questions to ask. They're all good questions for Christians to ask. But I want to talk about the first one. It's the one that so often becomes a stumbling block.

Is it the truth? When we as Christians lie – or misrepresent God, we keep others from knowing the good news. When Jesus told the parable of the talents, after the first slave (and the second) shows his master that he has doubled what was entrusted to him, “His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’” (Mt 25:21 & Mt. 25:23) Their faithfulness to

the master's intention paid off. But for the slave that hid his master's treasure in the ground (I'll suggest that the master's treasure includes all truth.), "throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Mt. 25:30).

As Christians, we need to be honest in everything we say. We need to be trustworthy in everything that we do. Otherwise we misrepresent our proclamation that Jesus has changed our lives. And if Jesus hasn't changed me, how can he change anyone else.

I'm ashamed of how I handled this. But a few weeks ago, a woman was handing out what I'll call "Come to Jesus" flyers in Walmart. They (the flyers) didn't take the tact that I would have. They focused on the evils of alcohol and smoking. Let's admit it. Smoking is not healthy. Overindulgence in drinking is prohibited in Scripture. But she wasn't talking about "overindulgence." I mentioned in passing, "Be careful, now. Jesus turned water into wine." To which she replied, "But that wine didn't have alcohol." I tried to correct her (and this is why I'm ashamed of how I handled it), but I got a bit snarky (not something that would build goodwill). Her argument (counter to what Scripture implies) was that the wine couldn't have included alcohol because Jesus was perfect. Was her logic flawed? Jesus is perfect? Because he is perfect, he wouldn't lead anyone into sin. I agree with that.

Where I see the flaw in her logic was that her first assumption was that wine containing alcohol was sinful, (if she is right) then Jesus would not make wine containing alcohol.

But, "the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Lk 7:34 & Mt. 11:19a)

If we were to extend that logic, we would have to question whether Jesus really did feed the multitudes with fish and bread. Gluttony is a sin, therefore eating is a sin. Or we would have to abandon the unrighteous to their doom because to be a friend of tax collectors and sinners, is to be a sinner oneself.

So what am I trying to get to, here? First, that as Christians we need to be particularly careful of sticking to the truth and being honest in all our dealings. Sometimes that might be difficult when a white lie seems apropos. "Does this dress make me look fat?" But even then, the truth is easy because it's probably not the dress. Just say, "No." And if it really is the dress say, "Yes," to prevent embarrassment. Be known as truth tellers.

Obviously, that goes to helping to proclaim the radical truth of Salvation and Resurrection. But it also helps with sharing our own stories of faith and to expect more beyond the evidence we know.

Noah had no evidence that a flood was coming when he started to build his ark. Even today meteorologist can't accurately predict weather more than a few days out. But he trusted God. Moses' mother had no evidence that he would be rescued from the river, but she trusted God who is always faithful. The disciples who filled those jars with water before it was wine, had no expectation that it could happen (they may not have even understood what Jesus was asking them to do until after they dipped in their dippers), but they trusted Jesus who was always faithful.

See, we need to watch out for the lies or misrepresentations that we tell ourselves so that we can claim the promise of faith. That's why the poor can be confident that theirs is the kingdom of God, the grieving can hope for joy, and the hungry can trust that God will provide.

When we explore Scripture we see in God's truth that we can believe. As Mr. Spock would say, "It's only logical."

God is faithful.

In Jesus God has shown us the Way. That way is Truth. And it leads to life.

Because God is faithful, we have a true way to life. AMEN.