

August 7, 2011

SCRIPTURE:

Hebrew Bible: Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28

Epistle: Romans 10: 5-15

Gospel: Matthew 14: 22-33

A “PRACTICAL” THEOLOGY

If you are like me, you want a “practical” theology that you can depend on as you go through the inevitable storms of life. You know what theology is – it is our working out in human life who God is for us. It is literally God talk, talking about God, thinking about God, pondering about God. It is the human “trying” to understand and get to a place where we are comfortable and sure about this big question.... Who is God for me?

Practical theology has been included with biblical studies, church history and systematic theology as one of the four core disciplines for at least two hundred years.

Before the 1980’s practical theology focused on the skills and knowledge needed to maintain established patterns of church life and organizations. Then with the changing situation of the church, maintenance ministry looked increasingly impractical. Truly practical theology needed to be about pioneering new patterns of Christian discipleship, community and witness. Practical theology became for the mainstream of the church a way to discern a vocation beyond its traditional one as a kind of religious public service. Practical theology was meant to be a way to “recover the theology of the past” and then move on to “develop a theology for the future” in relation to things that really matter. Well .... What matters? A good indication that something matters is when it makes people weep. Tears of anger. Tears of joy., Tears of love. Tears of heartbreak..... Tears are theologically important. Thoroughly ordinary and deeply important.

As a minister, I have had over the years, many opportunities to stand with people as they weep. I have now done more than 150 weddings, and I have felt the lump in my own throat as a young man and woman stood in front of me, sobbing sometimes, sometimes just with quiet falling of tears as they make promises to guide them for a life time.

I have probably presided over as many funerals, where the tears are sometimes sobs but more often in our tradition softly falling tears of sadness, loneliness, fear and often regret over what might have been different in the past or the future if this great calamity had not come into their lives. I will never forget the time in the village on the West Coast when I had to stand at the coffin of a four year old boy as a whole community sobbed and wailed trying desperately to get to the point where a young mother and father could let go of their baby and close that coffin for the very last time.

I have even stood with people when rage overtook them at some terrible injustice and the tears of helplessness and disappointment cursed down their faces. Especially so when I have listened to the stories of survivors, or generational survivors of the residential school era and heard how a government and a church’s decisions ruined the future for so many.

These are the moments in a minister's life when a "practical theology" is desperately needed.

In our practical minds we might question this wonderful story in the gospel that we all know so well. I remember as a child the picture in the Sunday School room of a confident Jesus strolling across the angry water toward the cowering and frightened disciples. I had no doubts as a child that Jesus could do this. Later as an adult, with my practical and logical mind, I tried to explain it. This was a metaphor; this was a literary technique to teach a lesson, this was anything but PRACTICAL! And yet there still remained a small part of my childhood faith that assured me ..... this might have been, this could have been, I wish that this was literally true. Wouldn't it be wonderful, to be one of the disciples in the boat, frightened, terrified even, and see this one coming across the raging sea to make a miraculous rescue. And to be like Peter and dare to ask, "If it is you Lord, call me out to come to you on the water." And to hear that one word of assurance, "COME."

Would I be like Peter and step out of the boat. I wonder? Most likely I would be like Peter, if I dared to take this impossible step and then realized in my PRACTICAL head what I had just done. I like Peter would surely lose heart and begin to sink, crying out in fear to be rescued in spite of my foolish action. And then I imagine the hand reaching out, pulling me up and admonishing me gently that it was my faith that let me down. If only I had held fast to my faith, then I would have walked as confidently as Jesus did.. Don't we all, in our best moments, imagine that we would step out of that boat.

What boat are we sitting in today? Cowering and frightened and not daring to believe that the impossible is possible with Christ. What PRACTICAL THEOLOGY are we clinging to that prevents us from being able to walk on water? What world condition are we ignoring, here at home or far away in some war torn land, or drought stricken desert because in the PRACTICAL we tell ourselves that there is nothing that WE can do about it. Just imagine us, as a whole bunch of Peter's, stepping out of a boat, venturing forth, even though the going is going to be rough, even though we might almost sink and perish. And then the IMPRACTICAL. Jesus reaching out his hand and catching us, just at the right moment. Helping us like Peter back into the boat, stilling the wind and the waves, saving us from a sure disaster.

I think we need to ask ourselves, if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test our faith. If we want to be close to Jesus, this story implies, we've got to venture forth out on the sea, we've got to prove his promise through trusting his promises, through risk and venture. And we can't look at the person sitting next to us, and say, you go ahead, you step out, I'm going to stay as secure as I can, and let someone else take the risk. If you let yourself hear that still small voice in the early dawn hours, beckoning you to step out and step up, take a chance; do your part, walk out onto that risky water, defy the forces of nature, swim against the stream to come closer to him, who bids you to venture out into the storm. Know that PRACTICAL THEOLOGY requires this of YOU!

So back to my dilemma as minister. Those moments of human condition. How can I in those moments help others and help myself to deeply understand what it is to have and know a God who is standing right along side and weeping along with those in joy, those in sorrow and those in rage. For we Christians this God with us is the one who knew himself what it was to cry tears of joy, sorrow and rage. This is for us the Christ who insisted on sharing a human journey and fate. This Christ who chose the human condition and death, but chose it out of love and not out of rebellion. In all these moments of human life which bring us to tears, there is alongside us the one who himself knew and who's dying, saving words were "My God, my God, why... why?" The human condition just is what it is – heartbrokenness and it is where God chooses to be with us. God along side. Christ reassuring us "Take heart, I am here."

Rita Nakashima Brock in her book *Journeys by Heart*, says this: Human beings are constituted by our relationships and because of this we are by nature, vulnerable, easily damaged, and that vulnerability is both the sign of our connectedness and the source of the damage that leads us to sin and to be broken. She says "Sin is a sign of our broken heartedness, of how damaged we are, not of how evil, willfully disobedient, and culpable we are. Sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed."

And in that lies our "practical theology" I think. We are each of us, responsible for the other, all others, not just those we are most comfortable with or close to but ALL others. God in Christ stands with us, each of us in our human journey and asks us to do the same for one another. We are who we are because we entrust ourselves to one another in relationship – especially and at best in relationships of love. But there is no way to do that without making ourselves vulnerable. We can be hurt indeed, and we can hurt others indeed. When we love another we are bound to be hurt eventually – to have our hearts broken, or break another's heart. Yet we are **COMMANDED** by Christ to do just that. Not alone, but with Christ with us, always near saying, "TAKE COURAGE, IT IS I. DON'T BE AFRAID."

AMEN