

Weekly Reading – Monday, June 14, 2010

We turn now to the lessons for Sunday, June 20, the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 7. It also happens to be Father's Day. As readers of this column know, I am cautious about churches and preachers going overboard for Mother's Day. But now, Father's Day--that's a different deal! (Just kidding). Although, with 40 % of births in US being to single mothers these days one might ask, "Where are the Fathers?" I don't imagine these are immaculate conceptions!

Isaiah 65: 1 - 9

This is the "typological" OT lesson, which is chosen to complement the Gospel reading. The other ("semi-continuous" option) is from I Kings 19. What makes this Is. 65 reading a complement to the Gospel reading from Luke 8 is the picture of faithless Israel in verse 4, "A people . . . who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places, who eat swine's flesh," and so on. This is part of the larger indictment of Israel in these verses as "a rebellious people, a people who provoke me to my face continually." Rather than being holy incense to the Lord, they are "smoke in my nostrils." God's judgment is real, consequences are promised. And yet, in verses 8 - 9, there is talk of a remnant, of judgment withheld because of some goodness yet there in the vine of Israel. Somewhat like the Genesis passage in which Abraham asks the Lord's mercy for a town if there are ten righteous people in it. Makes me think of many of our churches, beset by conflict and often worshipping other gods, and yet in every church there seem to be real saints, amazing faithful people, whose graciousness, patience, and faithfulness is a gift. These "saving remnants" continue to be the healthy red blood cells in many congregations counteracting the many (too many) malignant ones. How can preachers encourage and empower the saving remnant in the congregation?

Galatians 3: 23 - 29

Another great, classic Galatians text, especially the final two verses. But it is important to keep the final two verses about the end to cultural/ racial, economic/ class, and gender distinctions in the context of what precedes, which is God's new creation in Christ and the declaration, "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." Note the indicative, "you are." This is not something that must be achieved. It is a new status, a new being, effected and given by God. They (and we) don't need to try to become this, they are this, by grace. The Galatians do, however, need to be who by God's grace they are, a new community where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. The indicative, as Fosdick said, of what God has done precedes the imperative of what we are to do. A new reality and a new possibility have come, by the grace of God. Therefore, live into it, inhabit it, be it, be who by God's grace you are. The final verse ties it to the larger Galatians context, where false teachers are promoting a re-embrace of a legal, human-effort view of faith and gospel. No, says Paul, "You are (already) Abraham's offspring" by virtue of Christ. It is important that preachers get the relationship of indicative (what

is from God) and the imperative (our response) right if the gospel of grace is to be preached and heard. In this sense, the saints in every congregation (see above) are the sign of God's new creation at work already in the midst of the old.

Luke 8: 26 - 39

It is interesting to hold this story in dialogue with the Isaiah lesson. In Isaiah, hiding out in caves speaks of Israel's "lostness," as it does here of the demon-possessed Gentile. But here, Jesus goes to the lost, goes to the tombs to find this man and reclaim him, just as Christ goes to our tombs and hiding places to seek and find us. Jesus, the first verse, makes clear has "crossed over" to the Gentile side of the territory, going to an "unclean" place and people. The man who meets him will remind many of us of the homeless and mentally ill who haunt the valleys of our own great cities. Jesus speaks to the demon(s) who have hold over the man and casts them out and into the herd of pigs. The townspeople, alerted by the swineherds, come to see what's up and find the now healed, restored man. Now here's the strange thing. The people, seeing the healed man, don't rejoice or welcome Jesus. They ask, implore, him to leave. What's up with that? Recalls the famous question of John 5, "Do you want to be healed?" Well, maybe not, especially if it has economic consequences that are costly, which a herd of pigs being drowned would be! In the final scene, the restored man asks that he might leave with Jesus, but Jesus says no and tells the man to go back home as an apostle, one sent to tell of God's mighty deeds. You wonder how it will go for this man. Will he be received at home or rejected? Will he stay healed or relapse? Why does Jesus send him on this mission rather than taking him along on his? Seems to me those same questions confront many of us when we have been blessed by Jesus.