

## "RENEWAL REQUIRES THINKING CHRISTIANS"

Luke 12: 49 - 56

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I've heard it said that the only real sermon that you have to preach is the one that tells of your own "coming to faith." I don't know if that's true but I used to have that sermon...and I preached it every time I went to a new church the first Sunday. But, in my cleaning-out and throwing away old sermons that didn't fit where I am today, I'm afraid that it got discarded. The following is but a poor imitation, remembrance and reflection of that sermon.

When I decided to enter the ministry it was like a "shot" or a "bolt out of the blue." I'd gone through most of my youth and college preparation not knowing what I wanted to do. I was a business major in college, with some background and experience in life insurance, and a possible interview with a General Motors training program in the offing. But there was that little matter of military service (it was 1957) and I'd received some deferments from the government to finish college. And so I enlisted, choosing a program in the Army Security Agency where I'd seen that they had a program called the Army Language School. (They didn't know that I'd had Latin in high school, gotten straight A's in French in college, but I did and getting into the program didn't worry me at all)

After 6 mos. of German in Monterey, Ca., I headed for Frankfurt, Germany, but there was that very special someone I'd met my Sr. year in college and she decided that she'd much rather see Germany and "the world" than finish her last 2 years of college. So we got married, even took a honeymoon before I headed overseas. When I got there all the "language slots" were filled, and because I had that

business background, they stuck me in a Finance Office of the A.S.A. pushing papers. I did get to use my German because there were lots of German "nationals" (what we called the civilians) working in that office.

I had used up more leave time getting married and enjoying my honeymoon than I was entitled to for that 1<sup>st</sup> year in the service, so we were without time off to get around and see the countries. We were singing in the Frankfurt Central Chapel (Lois and I met in the concert choir at the Univ. of Dubuque, in Iowa) and the choir director told me of a program that the Army has called Administrative Absence for religious retreats! It wasn't charged to your vacation time. Wow...that sure appealed to me (and to Lois) I think in our 2 years over there, I must have gone on 2 or 3 of these "religious retreats."

At a Protestant Men of the Chapel retreat, a man by the name of James M. Robinson, (whom I've just met again in the last couple of years at the Jesus Seminar) was the speaker and I came away from that retreat asking the question, "Why have I never considered going into the ministry?" And I always tell people that God is "sneaky!" They don't understand until I explain to them that I was trying to get extra "vacation" by going to a religious retreat, and came away with the claim upon my life to consider going into the ministry!

And in this whole decision-making process I remembered that as I was going across the stage to receive my college diploma, the college President, who had been my pastor as a young person, said to me, "You know, David, I've never given up hope that one day you'll go into the ministry!" Another WOW! (You'd have to know the really "secular" nature of my lifestyle in those days to get the full impact of that WOW)

And I suppose what really impacted my life, besides the retreat and the remembrance of my college graduation, was the fact that we saw in Germany these huge cathedrals that would seat 1,000 or more basically empty, except for the occasional Bach or Brahms concerts. It began to make me wonder if this is what our American churches were going to look like in another generation or two.

I entered seminary at Union in New York in the fall (1960) with the goal of how could I orient my life toward the renewal of the church. I'm going to skip several years to 1966 when I made the decision to join the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago because Chicago was where most of the work in church renewal was going on. Besides the Institute there was the Urban Training Center, and the Chicago City Missionary Society...it was definitely the place to be for those interested in church renewal. We spent the better part of the next 7 years getting the training which we thought we needed to help lead the church toward revitalization and renewal...and what did we find at the end of that time? A church that was pretty disinterested!

I spent between 1975 and 1992 serving churches, primarily as an Interim (a couple were Stated Supply, which is how I became the installed, called pastor at Comm. Presby. in Pittsburg) and what I basically heard were those "7 Last Words of Dying Churches"... we've never done it that way before...the church wasn't really interested in renewal...was what it came down to...

I think I have some "feel" for Jesus' petition... "Do you think I have come to bring peace on earth?" or "Why can't you decide for yourselves what is right?" Jesus was about transformation...he knew that he couldn't overthrow the Roman Empire, but he could try to change the way that people related to their situation...he wanted them to think about their lives, their relationships and their faith.

I wrote a piece for our church newsletter...(it hasn't made it passed the "editor" yet) but it has some of these thoughts in it...Are you aware of the beliefs by which you live? Would you call yourself a theologian? To be a good theologian is to be a Christian who thinks! There seems to be a belief that only the "professionals" need to do any thinking, but that is wrong. Any one who does ANY thinking about God, about Christ, or even about religion is indeed a theologian. But to be a GOOD theologian you need to be one who thinks.

Many intelligent people are still operating out of a very simplistic view of religion and of faith. They have been led to assume that faith is incompatible with intellectual challenge and integrity. And the best way to encourage someone to think is not listening to a sermon, but to ask questions and then interact with the answers... And where do you do that? Not in church worship! And how many manage to put themselves in the kinds of situations where this kind of interaction takes place?

Sure, when you read the thoughts of others sometimes you are stimulated, but no amount of learning about the "ideas" of others takes the place of thinking for yourselves, and then interacting with others in discussion.

It seems to me that it is very true to say that we DO NOT LIKE TO QUESTION BELIEFS THAT WE HAVE HELD, often for a long time. To try and understand differently what you have previously thought about is a kind of thinking that is very demanding.

Apparently the deacons in the Pittsburg church are doing some "polling" of the positive and negative aspects that people have regarding the church. My "negative" criticism was that we have too few who are willing to find the time to do some "thinking" and "interacting" with others regarding their faith and their religion.

I think it is a “cop-out” to respond that you don’t have time, or the inclination, to go down that road of serious thinking; and just either say, or think, that you’ll leave that to the professionals, or the seriously motivated.

However, if you are really interested in any kind of renewal in the church...your church or ANY church, then there must be a renewal of thinking. Without this kind of attention to thinking, there will be no church renewal. Trying to renew the church with gimmicks, or merely by arousing emotion, will not do the job.

From the Methodist tradition there comes a way of thinking that might be useful to consider; they call it the “quadrilateral.” Any theological thinking or reflection ought to include (1) what does Scripture say? (2) what does our tradition say? (3) what has experience taught us? (4) and finally, what does reason teach us?

We should rejoice in the fact that our Presbyterian and reformed tradition encourages us to think...I’m sure you are aware that there are many religious denominations and traditions to encourage you to “check your brains” at the door, along with your coat and hat!

When you reflect back upon our history and see where we have come from...and you can pick a topic or any subject, racism, feminism, ecumenism...you can fairly quickly see that we ought to be using some of this ability to think regarding homosexuality and inter-faith relationships, or whatever in terms of our future. This is the way of renewal; and thinking and even possibly changing our thought patterns is involved.

I’ve always loved to sing “Give me that old time religion”, but when I reflect upon what it means I say to myself, “No, I don’t mean that” I wouldn’t say “Give me that old-time medicine or Give me those old time communications.” Why

are we willing to settle for a faith or a religion that is less than contemporary? There doesn't seem to be a stampede in our time to be people like the Amish.

There are roughly 3 aspects of current wisdom that seem relevant for re-thinking the nature of our faith. (1) the rise of historical thinking over the past 2 centuries has profoundly affected all of Western thought, from science to literature. (2) Christians cannot avoid taking modern science seriously, since it, more than any other factor, shapes today's cultural worldview. New theories of the origin of the universe, as well as new theories concerning the operations of the smallest cells within our brains, must be explored by Christians thinking through what it means to be created (by God) in God's image. (3) It is imperative that Christians take seriously the contemporary discussion of pluralism. The recognition of multiplicity and diversity in our cultures, our lives, our thought is a central characteristic of our age.

I just find it hard to believe that any church, or any religion that does not THINK long and hard about these matters will find that it has a future in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world. Amen