

April 18, 2003

## An Easter Message

Today is Easter Sunday and I went to church for the first time in many months, having been prodded to do so by my 14 year old daughter. The Presbyterian Church she selected was very nice and I felt comfortable there.

But, as my religious faith develops over time, I find organized religion unsatisfying because the theology lacks rigor. This is understandable. In our society, church attendance – and, more importantly, financial support – is voluntary, so churches fall over each other to make their theological messages attractive to their congregations.

And, who makes up these congregations? Well, although I am unaware of any research studies on this, my observation is that those who voluntarily attend religious services are those who are looking for answers. The desired answers are those that are easy, definitive and upbeat – that afford excuses, and relieve the believer of the need to make decisions or to take responsibility. Theologies with such messages often portray a God who is little more than a Santa Claus for adults.

So it was that I found today's Easter Sermon so interesting.

The minister based his message on the closing verses of the Book of Mark, which as you may know ends with the women discovering the empty tomb and running away after being told by the angel that Jesus had risen. The punishment for sin, of course, is death, and since Jesus had not sinned, his punishment was unjust unless it was a sacrifice for the sins of others. The resurrection validates both Christ as Messiah and his promise to all believers of forgiveness of sin. Our sins are forgiven. The past does not matter. This, the minister said, was the Easter message for all people, even those living today with failure, illness, death and pain. The resurrection is a second chance, a rebirth. Let us all worship God with joy for this wonderful and miraculous gift.

But isn't this only half the story? Isn't this only the half that the congregation wants to hear?

Their sins are forgiven. Their mistakes do not count against them. This is wonderful, because it relieves the overhang of the past, the burden of worrying about the consequences of past misdeeds. Unfortunately, however, it does not answer what I call the First Really Big Question (FRBQ), "What is the purpose of existence?" Or, in terms the congregation understands, "OK, my sins are forgiven, now what do I have to do to for salvation (that is, to give meaning to my life) and go to Heaven?"

[There is a Second Really Big Question, but that's a discussion for another day.]

If the resurrection validates Christ as Messiah, there is some good news and some bad news. The good news is that the sins of the believer are forgiven. The bad news is that the answer to the FRBQ is not very comforting to those sitting in the pews, which is why ministers rarely talk about it much.

Remember that the congregation wants answers that are easy, definitive and upbeat and that absolve them from decisions and responsibility. Christ's answer to the FRBQ – taken to its essence – is easy enough: love God and your neighbor as much as you love yourself. The problem, of course, is that this answer is by no means definitive.

This becomes clear with even a cursory study of Christ's ministry where prostitutes, thieves and other unsavory characters often turn out to be the 'good guys', and the prototypical 'good guys' (those successful, hard working conformists always doing the 'right things', contributing to society, and righteously judging others) often turn out to be headed in the wrong direction. (There's hope for me yet!)

The pews are filled with prototypical good guys looking for the church to make all the decisions as to what is right and what is wrong, and provide them with the latest edition of God's commandments. The congregation is happiest, of course, if it just so happens that what is right and wrong is consistent with their present conduct, and if the commandments do not impose more than an incidental constraint on the prevailing lifestyle. And it is not surprising that the churches mold Christ's message to keep their customers satisfied.

Close evaluation of this theology, however, shows that it does not work, and every so often ministers have to address the logical difficulties that inevitably result from an "easy and definitive" interpretation of Christ's message. How, for example, can achieving salvation by merely conforming one's conduct to a specified standard (essentially, justification by works) be reconciled with Christ's message of justification by faith? And, how does free will fit logically into a plan where the conduct required for salvation is pretty specific and all sins are forgiven? (Note that this is very different from the more common question about free will: How can free will coexist with an omniscient God?) Sermons on these issues tend to be pretty muddy.

Christ's full message is neither easy, nor definitive. But, it is ultimately much more rewarding than the watered-down derivative presented for the comfort and convenience of the prototypical good guys sitting in the pews.

The non-believer is relegated to existential Hell. Without a framework for "salvation", the meaning of his life is determined solely by what he accomplishes through his exercise of his free will. Mere existence has no meaning. Meaning comes solely from the results of the decisions he willfully makes.

As the non-believer thinks about the meaningless of his existence and the challenge of creating meaning solely from his willful decisions, he inevitably suffers the anxiety, anguish, unease, fear and dread known as existential angst. After all, without faith and without God, he has to reject all of the philosophies, sciences, political theories, and religions that would provide a framework for his decisions, because any such framework is the result of the decisions of others.

Since Christ's answer to the FRBQ is subjective – not definitive – the only difference between the existential non-believer and the Christian is that the Christian accepts, by faith alone, Christ's minimal framework to guide the believer's exercise of free will.

Thus, a Christian who fully understands Christ's message also faces an existential quandary (which is why I can never understand why all those prototypical good guys in the pews are always smiling so much). Good and bad – the correct exercise of free will – are subjective. So, the Christian has to pursue salvation and create meaning for his life by making his own decisions as to what constitutes love of God and love of neighbor. While he has the comfort of knowing that his mistakes (his sins) will be excused (forgiven), he also knows that he ultimately faces judgment on the magnitude and quality of what he does accomplish. And, he does not know in advance how his score is adding up.

The full message of Christ is that God forgives the sins of believers, and God gives those believers a wonderful opportunity to use free will in His service and the service of others. While

making the right decisions to truly demonstrate love of God and love of neighbor is terribly difficult, it is also tremendously rewarding. More rewarding than the prototypical good guys in the pews will ever know. Christ's message is that life in pursuit of salvation is difficult and uncertain, but the potential for fulfillment and meaning is unlimited.

Happy Easter.