

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Poison Information Centre"
Dr. J. Dent

March 15, 2015
Fourth Sunday in Lent

Let me state just a few clarifications around how I address difficult or controversial topics within this congregation and denomination. First of all, thank you for many verbal comments re attempts at talking through difficult topics within the faith in these days. Thank you also to those of you who took the time and effort to write me emails on several of the difficult topics I raised last week in attempting to comment briefly on all the ten commandments. Yes, I was more interested to presenting how we might begin to address controversy together. You know I was not presenting in detail or in depth my views, informed by Scripture, on abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality and paraphilia, murder, property, women, slavery, human rights, marriage, adultery, divorce, and how to appropriately interpret the Bible for today on these and other important topics.

I struggle week by week to interpret some of the passages that we read together with most of the rest of the body of Christ in that three year cycle of readings called *The Revised Common Lectionary*. Mostly I have done this with you since I came here in July of 2007. I am glad many of you have spoken to me, and I hope that openness and thoughtfulness in our communicating together will continue.

I also thought it important to explain how I come to this Sermon time and some of the interpretative process by which I come to the Scriptures. Let me begin by saying I in no way see myself as better than any of you. I consider myself a fellow struggler with you to live out the Christian faith. I come to God first for what I believe God wants me to say. In the various courts of the Church, here in St. John's, in the Maritimes for Synod and in General Assembly which this year is in Vancouver, I trust God for what I will say and how I will vote, according to my conscience, persuaded by the Holy Spirit.

Each of us comes to God through Christ, and we admit we need God because we are broken people. This broken or poisoned state in which we come to God is the context for understanding what God is doing in us as individuals, as a group and as the worldwide movement called "the Church." Unless we see our need for God as sinners, as rebels, as those who need to

be transformed by God, because we cannot transform ourselves, unless we acknowledge our need, we will not be able to come together to discuss difficult issues, indeed, perhaps not even agree on simple and basic issues.

It is possible to come here to church and mainly believe that we come with our rights as individuals, rather than our brokenness that we cannot repair. The work of God in us through the Holy Spirit is that of restoration, or sanctification, which happens and continues to happen as we acknowledge our need of God and one another. Of course we can still acknowledge our need and disagree with one another. I will not be able to control what you think or believe, and we are both glad I do not have such a power. I will continue to put forward what I believe God has revealed to me through the Scriptures, as to what is true and right, good and helpful. We will not always agree. But we are all called to follow God and what God says.

So with this in mind, I come to the Scriptures, I come first of all to have relationship with God through Christ, and then because of that relationship, to have relationship with other believers. Christians in the larger body of Christ don't agree on baptism, on Holy Communion, on Christian education. We also worship God with different kinds of music and different kinds of prayers. But because we have relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord, we have relationship to one another.

As I come to the Scriptures, I read the Old Testament in light of the New. I understand the Law is interpreted in the light of the Gospel, the Good News of Christ. I know that we do not treat one another as property or degrade any human being on the basis of race or financial status or social background, or national origin. The Scriptures tell us in Galatians 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This tells us that God has had a progressive plan for relationship with God, beyond Israel, beyond the time of slavery, and beyond the time of male domination over female, toward unity in Christ Jesus.

Each of us has choice in what do. We all have predispositions, genetic tendencies, inner motivations. We all have choices in our sexual relationships, even if we have a general tendency toward other sex attraction or same sex attraction. It is true that there is choice in those who consider themselves transsexual, gender neutral, bisexual, and queer in a number of ways. Everyone has choices. In fact, many experiment in relationship

choices for a season in their lives: someone's attraction and choices are not necessarily lifelong. The media often states that there is only one lifelong genetic predisposition and that's that. But I say to you there are many myths as we approach the sexual questions. It is awkward and difficult to address this area of life in just a few minutes. To be upfront with you, I have had inquiries here and elsewhere whether a homosexual person is welcome in the congregation. Homosexual persons are welcome here.

How we come here in attitude is crucial. Heterosexual and homosexual persons are welcome here and any others with various paraphilias are welcome as we all stand together at the cross and confess our brokenness before God, and desire God's transformation in our lives. If someone has unwanted same sex desire, or is experiencing sexual problems as a married or a single person, we come together to God to ask for help. Why? Because we all need help. As sexual beings we need help. Sexuality was supposed to bring us together and bring life. Instead, it has brought division, to the body of Christ and to the larger community.

We cannot come together where any particular person or group demands their rights. We come together in our need, at the foot of the cross, asking Christ to direct us, love us, care for us. And of course there are many other needs we have besides sexual needs. But we are to bring all our needs together, every one. I know this brief statement won't answer or satisfy many questions and concerns. Perhaps some of us can come together on Wednesday nights to discuss these issues further. I know some of you will not agree with me. That is the reality. I trust we will respect each other through the process.

Back to Numbers, chapter 21: I believe what happened in the wilderness with Moses was a breakdown of respect. It was a breakdown of respect for God first of all. It was also a breakdown of respect for the leadership that God provided in Moses and then in the leaders, the elders that Moses saw appointed.

In that breakdown of respect, and lack of gratitude for freedom from the slavery of Egypt, God allowed there to be an outbreak of poisonous snakes. These snakes seemed to appear in supernatural numbers. We do not know the exact timing, but what we read is a kind of natural justice, where the poisonous venom of disrespect, ingratitude and a demanding spirit of entitlement is met with literal poisonous snakes. People are bit. They

recognize they are becoming serious ill and may die. They go back to Moses and ask him to pray for an answer.

Now does God today usually give nations and individuals this kind of natural justice? Are plagues and natural disasters and famines a kind of natural justice from God today? I would say they are not. There is a random quality to the terrible events that happen around the world, most recently in Vanuatu. War appears to me to be a human invention, although we do read in the Old Testament that God uses war. Just as “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” is better than one murder resulting in the decimation of a whole tribe, so God appears to use limited warfare in the Old Testament to his ends. In the New Testament, we see nothing of this tactic any longer. Jesus invites us to love our enemies, to reflect on ourselves as murderers, those who have ever hated or thought evil thoughts about others, to reflect on ourselves as adulterers, who have thought lustful thoughts about others, whether of the other sex or of the same sex. We are all together one as needy and broken people, even if we don't like to see ourselves as such.

We all need the Poison Information Centre, that is found on the inside page of the telephone book. There you will find a 24 hour, 7 day a week telephone number to help you in case someone in your household has been poisoned. They will help you with the right antidote or at least the right course of action.

In our spiritual state, the apostle John writes in his gospel in John, chapter 3, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the strange story of the brass serpent being lifted up in the wilderness that healed the people who were bitten by poisonous snakes, if they chose to look up to that brass snake lifted up. That was a supernatural antidote for us natural, broken, poisoned people. We need Jesus. We need to look up to him, as we reenact again this year the historic reality of his being lifted up on a Roman cross and being tortured to death, so that we might have life. We look up to that same cross across all these centuries of history, nearly two thousand years ago now.

There at the cross we find healing. Perhaps we weren't even looking for healing. Perhaps we didn't even know that we have bitterness, resentments, anger, fears, anxieties and sins that make us believe there are some who have no needs, while we are the needy. But we all are the needy ones. As we know we have been poisoned and bitten, so we come to the Cross of Christ in desperation for life. Let us once again come there together. Let us pray.