

“Confronting Our Image Problem”

Luke 13:10-17

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The church in our time has an image problem. It is part perception and part reality, but many people, especially young people, view the church as a gathering of the narrowminded who fuss over a long list of do's and don'ts while the world's needs go unaddressed. Evangelicals in general and Baptists in particular are seen as legalists and hypocrites who are fussy about the perceived sins of others but unconcerned with their own, aligned with one political party no matter what, and exclusive in their worldview - in other words, the kind of people who will not be happy to going heaven unless the other place is crowded.

It doesn't help that this is the kind of Christian voice that is heard most often in public life, partly because these voices are out there and partly because they raise ratings. Some years ago, my colleague and friend, Charles Kimball, who is an expert on Christian-Muslim relationships, put it this way. Naming the personalities of that time, he noted how often something would happen in the Middle East with some connection with Islam, a talk show host like Larry King would have Jerry Falwell on, and the first thing Falwell would say would be, “Now, Larry, I am not an expert on Islam.” “Why,” Charles would ask, “didn't Larry say, ‘Who scheduled this person to be on my show when even he says he is not informed on the subject?’”

But, of course, we know why Falwell and those like him to this day get air time. The most strident voices drive up ratings. That has not changed. So, we are fighting an uphill battle when it comes to presenting a different image of Christian faith. How do we engage this battle? How do we confront our image problem? How do we present a more attractive form of our faith which is the form we know?

For the most part, we simply follow Jesus. As today's reading from Luke makes clear, Jesus is not a narrowminded exclusivist who is

obsessed with rules. He is a compassionate healer who places a priority on addressing the needs of people he encounters. And this is not an isolated incident. Over and over again people come first for Jesus.

It is not that he discards the teachings of the law. In the Sermon on the Mount, he says that he has not come to do away with the law and the prophets but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). But such fulfillment requires an understanding of the purpose of these teachings which is to help people love God and neighbor. Some zealous interpreters of the law have forgotten this.

In this particular story, the laws at stake are those that relate to the Sabbath. People are forbidden from doing work on the Sabbath, but exactly what work is forbidden, and what exceptions might there be? As is often the case with significant yet controversial issues, scripture does not answer these questions as precisely as we ask them. So, there are various commentaries in the Hebrew tradition of the time which offer insight. And they include a curious mixture of ideas.

In the realm of medical matters, the Mishnah, compiled around 200 CE, forbids the treatment of non-fatal issues and offers other guidelines (*Luke*, Richard Vinson, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, pp. 453-454). One should avoid deliberately taking medicine, but one could eat or drink things that were naturally medicinal. One should not straighten a child's body or set a broken limb, but if a broken hand or limb was washed in a natural way and it was healed, that would be "O.K." Childbirth was allowed, a midwife could be called, and they could "profane the Sabbath for the mother's sake" in the process.

Such are the teachings of the time, but they are not in scripture, and as Jesus reminded his critics on another occasion, the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). So, when Jesus encounters a woman who has been plagued for eighteen years by a condition that prevents her from being able to stand up straight, he heals her, even though it is the Sabbath. The leader of the synagogue is indignant. This is not a marginal issue. Sabbath observance lies at the heart of Jewish faith. This woman's condition is not life-threatening, she has lived with it for eighteen years, she could be healed the next day. But Jesus heals her immediately.

To be more precise, Luke reports that Jesus says to her, “Woman you are *set free* from your ailment,” he lays his hands on her and immediately she stands up straight and praises God. Later, Jesus uses similar language, saying, “And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be *set free* from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” Liberation is a central theme in Luke, a key part of Jesus’ mission as underscored in his calling in Luke 4, and it is connected to the purpose of Sabbath as defined in scripture.

There are two versions of the Ten Commandments. In Exodus people are told to rest on the Sabbath because God rested on the seventh day of creation (Exodus 20:8-11). But in Deuteronomy people are told to rest because God delivered them from bondage in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). So, Jesus is offering his own commentary on what is allowed on the Sabbath. In the Spirit of liberation from all that oppresses people, God’s mission in the world and his, Jesus liberates this woman on the Sabbath, and thus says that acts of mercy are “O.K.”

And while he is at it, Jesus adds this note – the people who criticize him for healing the woman think it is “O.K.” to untie various farm animals and lead them to get water, a kind of work, on the Sabbath, but they are not “O.K.” with meeting a human need like the woman’s?! “You hypocrites!” he says.

But the bottom line in all of this is that Jesus places a priority on human need. There are religious teachings, principles of behavior - certain things are right and wrong - but they are designed to meet human needs, not deny them. And when human needs and principles thought to be right come into conflict, human needs take priority.

So, if he is our Savior and Lord, our example and guide, this is where we place our priority – on meeting human need – not on rigid adherence to rules that may or may not reflect Divine intent. If we do this, we will present a different image of what it means to be a Christian, a much more attractive image.

And the truth is this has been the dominant focus of this church for 207 years. We do things together like clothe thousands of people every year through our clothing ministry and feed hungry children on weekends through backpack buddies. We house Family Promise

families a couple of times a year and bring the wonder of Christmas to a thousand children each year at Toy Joy. We go on mission trips to New York and Arkansas, Alabama and Texas, Honduras and Kenya. We partner with CBF field personnel Marc and Kim Wyatt in welcoming immigrants and refugees here in the Triangle.

We build houses with Habitat for Humanity and we build relationships with people of other faiths – Muslims, Jews and others. And individually we do more things than we can document for people in need every day. This church puts people first, we address human needs, we are not bound by an obsession with rules nor do we spend our time trying to figure out who is included in God’s realm and who is excluded. That’s up to God. And all of this is of the utmost importance for the good it does and the witness it provides. All of this presents an image of what Christian faith is all about, a different image.

One biblical scholar put it this way – put a mouse before a cat and you discover what a cat is; put a person in need before a Christian and you discover what a Christian is. Indeed. And that is the first and best thing we can do to confront the church’s image problem in this day.

But we can also take advantage of any opportunity we have to leverage our influence in the public arena. If a legalistic view of Christian faith can be amplified by the media, so can a kinder view. It takes a willingness to befriend journalists, not view them as the enemy; develop relationships; and take advantage of opportunities. We need not be naïve. I have a long history of working with television, radio and print media. I have had wonderful experiences and horrible ones. So, I pick and choose my issues and journalists carefully. But it is possible for this central part of our culture to benefit Christian faith.

One of the best stories I know is tied to this church. When Elizabeth Edwards’ funeral was held in December, 2010 at Edenton Street United Methodist Church, the nasty folks from the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas came to protest with their hateful signs, and the space they were given was right in front of our church sign at the corner of Salisbury and Edenton Streets. We covered up our sign so that it did not appear next to their signs in the national media.

Anyway, it is a small, family-centered, dysfunctional church. So, there were only a few people here from Topeka. There was a large counter-protest group given space across Edenton Street. And it just happened to be the day of Toy Joy. So, there was a long line of people down the street waiting to get into our church and be served compassionately by over a hundred of our members. It was a real-life, three-ring circus, but also a picture of life in America.

As it so happened, the Raleigh News and Observer sent a reporter to cover the Westboro folks. It was Andrea Weigl, who was the food editor then and the person on-call for whatever story came up over the weekend. But when she came near the church and told someone why she was here, that person told her about Toy Joy and suggested she talk to the leaders of that event and the church to understand all that was happening on our block that morning.

She talked to us and then wrote a magnificent story. She did not moralize or preach. She simply painted a picture of the day that represented so much of American life then and now. There was a tiny group of Westboro Baptists spewing hatred at a long and diverse list of people. There was a much larger group across the street protesting not just Westboro Baptists but all Baptists and most Christians. One person held up a sign that read, "Buddha Hates Baptists." One of our members got him to put that sign down by telling him about Toy Joy. And then, there was a third group of people, the largest group of all - people in need and First Baptist folks extending compassion and Christmas joy.

Andrea just painted a picture with words and it was a powerful picture. It began with the members of this church following Jesus in responding to human need. And then the impact of service was enlarged by the story being shared in print. The resources of this world can be used for good or ill. We might as well use them for good.

There is one other thing we might do to help the cause as we work on the church's image. We might consider speaking and acting more boldly. People often complain that the church has been marginalized, *has been*, passive voice, as if we have had nothing to do with this. There are many cultural shifts that have affected the church, but part of the

problem is that we have been too quiet and too absent when it mattered and thus marginalized ourselves.

On issues like race, divorce, sexuality, income inequality, gun violence and climate change, the church has certainly had something to say, but often not very much and not until the issues have been resolved to some extent. Often we can't even talk among ourselves because our views are so diverse when the greatest gift we might give our culture is not the answer on many issues but a model for civil discourse on them.

I have mentioned the boldness of the give-back food truck which we hope to have running by October. It will not only attract people to our space, feed hungry people and open the door to relationships; it will offer a sign of what we are doing in the community, broadcast our image of church and invite people of goodwill to join us. That's the kind of boldness we need in our actions and our speech. We begin by putting people first, but it's "O.K." to extend the witness of compassion through media opportunities and our boldness, as long we are motivated by the desire to address human need. As one of my mentors said – he who tooteth not his own horn hath not his horn tooteth.

Calvin Miller's book *The Philippian Fragment* tells a story about a mythic, first-century church which reflects many contemporary concerns. In one part of the story sister Phoebe is being criticized because she has missed several meetings of the Second Coming Scroll Study to care for lepers. The group is struggling with the question of whether Jesus will return before or after the great tribulation and thirty-two women have voted before while thirty-two have voted after. They need Phoebe to break the tie, but she keeps going off to help the lepers. Where do you want to be when the Lord returns, they ask, in this state of indecision or at the study? "There is where I want to be," Phoebe says, pointing to a circle of low, thatched huts where the lepers live.

There is where we want to be - wherever people are hurting and in need. That's what we are called to do and who we are called to be. And if we are about it, people will see a different image of the church, and they will be much more likely to want to be a part of it.