

"Don't Tell Me"
Grove Presbyterian Church
18 October, 2009

I don't like being told how to believe or that my beliefs are not correct.

Tough.

Get use to it.

I don't like it either. Didn't like it a bit when Ben Atkinson nearly failed me in Expository Writing because I was an inept writer.

Didn't like a bit when Coach Formicella benched me from my starting position because I was missing too many practices.

Didn't like a bit when my Doctor warned me to lose twenty pounds and take my Lipator.

We accept the value of criticism from others - fitness trainers, accountants, coaches, teachers, physicians, bosses, auto mechanics - why are our beliefs viewed differently?

***Correct me, O Lord,
but in just measure...
-- Jeremiah 10: 24***

~~~

Once upon a time there was a hot house tree. It was a pretty tree but protected in the hot house all its young life. Then someone bought it and planted it on the west side of their house. The winds came. The cold rains blew. The tree soon withered died, its bark too gentle and branches too frail from a lack of weather's toughening.

~~~

But let's assume this fellow is reflecting upon a bad church experience. Can't imagine a bad church experience, can you?

How did he or someone he cares about get hurt? Shut off, shut down, shut out. Silenced. Did he get bullied by someone who thought himself an authority in the church? It does happen.

Church does have a way of attracting those who are absolutely convinced they know what is absolutely right for absolutely everyone else.

Danger, danger, Will Robinson: our religion is displacing the authority of Christ with the authority of the Church.

So, is the issue really one of truth or one of authority? I know how I get when I am told to do something. My first instinct is flagrantly to do just the opposite, especially when you consider how right is my opinion. I have no problem submitting my soul to the authority of Christ. It's him changing my opinion that I have a problem with.

~~~

This young man's question also reflects that typical individualism about which we've spoken before:

*Personal religion? Fine and lovely.  
But that's easy, for you don't have to do any thing about it  
- nothing is required of you.*

Parade Magazine made this individualism the lead article a few Sundays ago. And you know it's right if its in Parade Magazine.

What American's are doing today is separating spirituality from religion, with many people disavowing organized practice altogether while privately maintaining some form of worship. The old terms - atheist and agnostic - are no longer catch-alls for everyone outside tradition belief. In fact, 24% of respondents put themselves into a whole new category: "spiritual but not religious."

Well, it's hardly a new category. This issue of 'spiritual rather than religious' was at the core of the book Habits of the Heart, a national bestseller in 1985.

The authors dubbed this "spiritual rather than religious" direction, "Sheilaism," coined by one of their interviewees, a young nurse who said, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice...It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other."

Fine, I guess. Though she's a nurse, right? Imagine her reaction if her patients told her: "I'm not a medical fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to the hospital or clinic. I really don't need all you nurses and doctors telling me how to be healthy."

Far more than us mainline Presbyterians or structured Romans or even the 700 Club, Sheila is the modern religious norm in the good old USA.

Of course, what we also wonder is: when did religion, in the mind of so many, lose its resonance of spirituality?

~~~

We try for equilibrium between the individual and the group, between personal beliefs and traditional.

Because we affirm the Lordship, that is, the authority of Christ over and above the lordship of people, state, or church, this phrase is a centerpiece of Presbyterian thinking:

God alone is Lord of the conscience...

We affirm this right to conscience as a hedge against tyranny in all its dreadful forms. We encourage dissent against the tyranny of the majority forcing you to conform to majority views, as well as the tyranny of the minority forcing you to bow to them.

For forced belief in any facet is totally inconsistent with faith in God, who beckons us to come and follow. Whose heart breaks when we ignore God's call to worship, service, fellowship. Faith, to be genuine, must be disclosed, never imposed.

Yet too often this same phrase about conscience is used as an excuse to justify whatever I want to believe. "When 20 Presbyterians get together, one seminary president said, 33 points of view will be represented." [Margo Houts, What Presbyterians Believe, PCUSA]. That's a whole lot of conscience and more than a few extra lords...

~~~

In the midst of this chaos of opinion, we try for wise balance with another motto:

*The Church reformed, always reforming,*

*according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit*

The motto is a stinging reminder to all those who are absolutely convinced they know absolutely the mind of God and absolutely speak for God, whether Sheila speaking to Sheila or some bully trying to control the church.

The power of the motto is tucked up inside the tense of the verb. For its correct version is: The Church reformed, always being reformed.

It is a passive. Has to be, because what the motto really says is we get it wrong so often. Our understanding of church here always is provisional.

We cannot reform ourselves. We accept it is a process, often in our failure, brokenness, mistakes. We are acted upon. God is the agent of our improvement. God acts, we are acted upon. The engines of our reformation are the Word of God changing us and by the call of the Holy Spirit transforming our hearts, minds, wills.

But there is one more thing. We do have to name it for what it is: the sin of self-righteousness.

Our conscience is free and unfettered, but also guided. We have a tail attached to this free-flying kite of individual conscience:

*according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit*

~~~

I don't like being told how to believe or that my beliefs are not correct.

We know how you feel. Why do you think we are Presbyterian? All the more reason then to be humble, to be diligent, to be led. And name it for what it is.

What is required is humility. Trust your opinion, your guts, but temper it with a sense of humor, a willingness to be open to better ideas, and a certain skepticism. It is amazing how brilliant you can think you are, until, that is, you meet someone who is even more brilliant. We all like to be right. Especially Sheila. Which reminds us to avoid becoming the very bully we dislike, the type who is absolutely convinced they know what is absolutely right for absolutely everyone else. Those very intolerant about other people's lack of tolerance.

What is required is diligence in searching the Scriptures for meaning through worship and Bible study.

What is required is a hunger to be led in your understanding by the Holy Spirit as it speaks to you and more so as it speaks to you through the counsel of others. How else does God whisper in our ears? For if your own conscience is your master, you follow a disappointing leader.

~~~

But then, we do take comfort when we look at Simon Peter.

Jesus has just asked his friends and followers who the crowd thinks he is. They mention a whole gambit of opinions.

Then, when pinned down by Jesus to say who they think he is, Simon Peter steps up and proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the fulfillment of all their hopes.

And Jesus smiles. Then Jesus goes on to describe how the Christ will be the Christ, through suffering, rejection, death, through renouncing power, through weakness (as the world defines weakness).

That's when Simon Peter corrects Jesus.

Got to love listening to how Simon Peter thinks Jesus wrong and tells him so. Finger wagging wrong. He rebukes Jesus. Reproves Jesus. Censures Jesus. Reprimands Jesus. Seriously warns Jesus. For Simon Peter knows better. Simons says...

Which to Jesus is tempting him to be the kind of powerful Messiah Peter wants him to be. Listen man, you got to play it the world's way, if you want to get anywhere in this world...

Of course, as always is the case, Jesus has the last word; and Simon Peter has to shut up, listen, and take it. And he's the better man for it. Because as wrong as he is, Jesus doesn't shut him out, shut hm down, shut him off.

Come, friend. Sure, you really don't get it. So lets get going.

Jesus loves more than all our wrong.