

"High Priest"
Exodus 28: 21-30
John 18: 19-24
Grove Presbyterian Church
19 July, 2009

It was a well intended and cute daily devotion. I read it one morning - July 8th to be exact -- in our little devotional magazine. The writer, reflecting on tolerance and openness, wrote, "If God calls someone to ministry, what right do I have to deny it?"

Well, now that sums up the problem in the church today...

For this is typical of the lazy thinking in the church today. Plus a shallow understanding of how God calls persons.

Of course you have a right and a duty to deny it. Tolerance is way over-rated. Tolerance is the lazy way of doing things.

The offices of ministry are neither earned by those more virtuous or righteous, nor is anyone entitled to such office. No one has a right to ordination. It is a burden, a responsibility. For us, call to God's work comes in two ways: the inner call and the outer call. A whole lot of people may feel the inner call. How God is inviting them to something different. That's fine.

But the outer call validates it. The outer call is the one where others - the church -- sense your call also, test it, evaluate it, confirm it. Call never has been nor ever can be a private matter.

You do have a responsibility to judge those called to serve. And a responsibility to be judged.

So how now, in talking about judging others, am I any different from the High Priest annoyed with this upstart, uncredentialed Jesus who, following his call by God, refused to play the game, refused to play by the rules?

The rules say respect authority.
The rules say work within the system to fix the system.

The rules say when you're in front of the high priest you show proper deference.

The rules say when the high priest asks you a question, you better answer rather than give a fly reply.

Listen:

Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.'

When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?' Jesus answered, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?'

Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

We enter the professional tension between being part of the club yet wanting to be outside the club.

The frustrations of running the shop.
 Fussing with the business rather than the gospel.
 Caretakers and chaplains rather than preachers.
 Editing Scripture lest you start meddling.
 Mascots rather than pastors.

Pity the pastor afraid of losing his or her position. So afraid he or she makes sure she or he does what he or she must to keep them happy, keep them content. A pleaser.

Far more freeing is to realize: who cares about pleasing anybody? It is not your business to please people - it is your business to please God as you experience God through the work of Christ in your life

You can sell you soul for the sake of the institution.

So we walk the razor's edge between maintaining decency and order (protecting the rules of the club) and heeding the reckless, unconventional spirit of God. If we are Christians, we all walk the edge, live in the tension, the paradox of these two worlds.

It is so easy to be critical of those who are the happy captives of the status quo. It takes no great courage to be critical.

I remember being properly obnoxious when young (only when I was young). We were preparing the Youth Sunday worship service. The assistant minister was busying ploughing other more welcoming fields so he abdicated his role as coach and guide. Come Youth Sunday we put on a show. Instead of the same service for both worship times, we kept it going for hours. Multi-media, poetry, lots of progressive music. Taking on all conformity and convention.

Ours was a commuter town, so as a counterpoint to slides projected on the sanctuary wall of our fathers walking to the train station in their business suit uniforms, getting on the train, going to work, we broadcasted tunes to wake them up and shake off their bourgeoisie submission.

Spending counterfeit incentive
 Wasting precious time and health
 Placing value on the worthless
 Disregarding priceless wealth
 You can wheel and deal the best of them
 And steal it from the rest of them
 You know the score, their ethics are a bore

You better, take care of business Mr. Businessman
 What's your plan?
 Get down to business Mr. Businessman if you can

Ray Stevens, "Mr. Businessman"

By the end of the service I regretted we had done that. An early gnawing of the Holy Spirit chewing on my soul that day? Because it slowly dawned on me how much guts and courage it takes to do what those fathers had to do, day in, day out. And here we were insulting them. I'm sorry. A little late, but I'm sorry.

Nobody condemns more viciously than the self-righteous critic. Nobody is more intolerant than someone who demands that you had better be as tolerant as they are. Being 'anti' is so very easy and so very lazy.

So I take comfort sometimes in the law of Hanlon's Razor: never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity.

Youth can be little different than those youth naturally scoffs at. They fight to stake out their non-conformity to the adult world and they do so by conforming absolutely to the youth world. Just try bucking the codes in High school and see what happens. Mostly harmless, though.

I remember one young man who was really into the Goth sub-culture, a true rebel with painted black fingernails, eye make-up, black clothes and lots of dangling metal. He use to go clubbing in Goth clubs in Newark. One day he was challenged to be really rebellious and non-conforming. So he visited one of his Goth clubs wearing khakis and a polo shirt.

So strange then that Christianity, a true counter-cultural movement, is viewed by so many young folk as the handmaiden of the establishment. Which may be why we seem irrelevant to so many, unless of course you want to get married or buried or need help with rent money.

In the beginning, we were a true blue counter-cultural movement. Christianity rocked the very roots of the empire:

Equality between men and women
 Pacifism
 Rejecting the authority of the state
 Equality between classes
 Communal liberality and charity
 Love of your neighbor
 Respect for others
 Actually believing in and practicing the possibility of loving commitments between husband and wife
 A morality beyond what was legal
 Claiming the immediacy of God and the spirit without needing religious professionals to interfere and impose their monopoly.

This was radical, counter-cultural stuff!

The worse thing that ever happened to the church was Constantine making Christianity the official church, the establishment church; imperial is as imperious does.

You want to ruin something? Adopt it, package it, market it, stamp it official, give it power. Soon enough leaders become managers. Soon enough the institution's mission becomes making sure the institution preserves the institution.

I remember Lee Iococca decades ago explaining that when the auto industry changed its mission from making good cars into making money, that was the exact moment when they stopped making both money and good cars.

So here standing before the top dog, the chief defender of the club, is this uncredentialed upstart Jesus. Not real deferential. Who knows institutions cannot change institutions. Only individuals can. It always is the upstart outsider who rocks us with something spiritually new and vibrant.

It's the Bible's way. All the great leaders to whom we look as examples of faith, all were outsiders who dared something different, who dared buck the system:

Jeremiah
Isaiah
Amos
Moses
Abraham

Which is why Mr. High Priest didn't get it. He forgot that every job has a risk to the soul. And in his case it was the risk of enjoying being High Priest. So much so even though he's retired and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, is the real high priest, he still hangs onto the power.

Power and privilege.
Hob-nobbing with Herod and Pilate.
Snap your fingers and they jump.

Soon you start thinking you deserve all the luxury and attention. Get caught up in position

So he sure didn't like Jesus' attitude - Jesus didn't jump. Insulted by Jesus, he has his flunky try to humiliate Jesus with a slap across the face. An attempt at intimidation.

And Jesus turns the other cheek and infuriates the High Priest. Jesus pushes us beyond vapid tolerance.

Turning the other cheek is no act of submission, but an act of defiance. You slap me to insult me? It means nothing. You do not disgrace me. Here's my other cheek. Cheeky. Do it again if you dare. You cannot shame me by what you do. You only shame yourself by doing it.

You want respect?
Start by being respectable

You want authority?
Give up power.