

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

“The Faith of a Fanatic”

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I thought I knew where this sermon was going. I picked the topic last September. At first it was a kind of dull title, “A Faith to Run From.” A preposition is a terrible thing to end a sentence with, but a sermon title you can end with anything. This Tuesday I decided to put a little bling to the babble, put a little snap in the service, and so I changed the title a bit. “The Faith of a Fanatic.”

When people say to me, and it annoys me, so don't say it any more, when people say to me, “You want to make God laugh? Just tell God your plan.” I don't think God messes with our lives that way. However, as a preacher I do hear a little chortle from the Creator when I post a sermon title months ahead. See, I thought this sermon would provide ammunition against the assault of the aggressive religionists. You know who they are. I would give you defense when the holy rollers become God's warriors and show up in your face. I was going to help you frustrate the fanatics who come into your life, holier than thou, and make you a little holier than they. Like the woman who was getting calls from total strangers because a medical billing service had launched an 800 number identical to hers, and she called and complained about it, and suggested that they change their number, and they said “You change yours,” and she said, “Well, I've had my number for 20 years, so you change yours,” and they said, “We're not going to change

ours.” And she said, “Fine. Everybody who calls me from now on, I’m going to tell them that their bill is paid in full.” The medical billing service had a new number the next day.

I was going to give you some favorite Scriptures to fend off the fanatics until Tuesday night. Tuesday night the Administrative Council asked me to pray before the meeting started, and you don’t want me praying for your meeting unless you give me some warning, so I can kind of think it through, because as I recall, I prayed that the meeting might be short, and that the people who had nothing to say would not say anything, and that all should listen to the wisdom of the ordained clergy and the almost-ordained clergy. Which they didn’t. And when the prayer was over, one of the members of the Council said to all who were there, “Chuck, you didn’t have your eyes closed when you prayed.” And I was in a particularly bad mood that night and so I said to him, “Neither did you, else how would you know?” Bev, that was your husband, just for the record.

The faith of a fanatic. The test I put not to others. We’re the ones who should open our eyes to ourselves. The faith of a fanatic. It’s to open our eyes to see ourselves and our faith. We are the fanatic with faith, our faith. Does it pass the test? Three parts to the test. Three questions I think we could ask ourselves, and should.

The first is the test of ego. Paul wrote it, we should remember it. “What we preach is not ourselves.” That’s the test of ego. What do we preach? Why do we do what we do? Richard Niebuhr taught that the Bible was an indispensable means of seeking its dispensability, and Bill Coffin interprets that broadly and adds, “In other words, it’s a signpost, not a hitching post. It points beyond itself, saying, “Pay attention to God, not me.”” We can test our faith by asking, “Is it calling attention to ourselves, or does it point beyond us?”

Tony Compallo tells the story of the time he was asked to work with a group of men in a federal penitentiary, and they were serving life sentences, and he had to assist a young woman from a local church to lead songs. He describes her as “effervescent and overflowing with religion.” As she was leading the men in song, she talked about how God was in her life, and what God would do for her. “As I was coming here today, I was driving behind a truck filled with gravel,” she said, “and a rock fell off the truck and struck my windshield and it put a chip in the glass, and a crack formed, and when I got out of the car, when I arrived here at the penitentiary, I was feeling so bad, so I went over to the side of the car and I put my finger on the nick, and I prayed, and I said to God, ‘You know how unhappy this is making me. Please heal it.’ And would you believe, when I lifted my finger off the windshield, it was healed.” And with one voice, twenty men on folding chairs shouted back, “No, we don’t believe it.” Compallo goes on to say, “I suppose one of the advantages of being in prison for life is that you don’t have to play social games. What more can they do to you? And I have to admit, I got some pleasure out of their answer. What they did not need to hear was talk about some God who could heal windshields but wouldn’t do a thing in response to the urgent needs in their own lives. She had reduced prayer to magic, and those men would have none of it. Good for them.”

We preach not ourselves. Egotism, it's a test of faith. This week I went to the store to buy some razor blades, and as I stood in line to pay my bill, a woman in front of me was checking out, she was a young woman and kind of downcast, and I noticed that she and the checker were talking about her purchases, and the checker was picking up a box of NutraGrain health bars because she didn't have enough money to buy them, and so I said, "Put it on my bill." And the clerk told me that was a nice thing to do, and the young woman kind of nodded and went off. I told Kathy, my wife, about that, and she said to me, "That must have made you feel real good." I wonder how it made her feel. That's the problem with spouses. They make you ask those questions. We preach not ourselves. It's not about us. The test of egotism, why do we do what we do?

Wednesday night we had a dinner here at the church, and the work team from Guatemala, the LAMMP, churches from all over the area, but ours included. It was wonderful food, and that group that went to Guatemala passed the test of egotism. They talked about how wonderful the Guatemalan people were, they talked about how much they had learned on their trip. They went there to help, but got so much back in return. One of our member said, "I will never forget those people. It's given me such a sense of priority, and such a sense of purpose and perspective. I'm not ever going to be the same. I had agreed," she said, "I had agreed to sponsor one of the children for a year in school for education, and when I went to Guatemala I got to meet that child, and she made a piece of cloth for me, she wove it herself and I have it in my home. It's my most valuable possession." Those folks on a mission team preached not themselves. They passed the test of faith. Egotism.

The second test of faith, the faith of a fanatic, your faith and mine... If we preach not ourselves, then what do we preach? What's the source? God spoke, we're told. People heard it. God said, "This is my son, my beloved child, listen to him." The test of authority - listen to him. Who are we listening to? What is our authority? If it's Jesus, because we're Christian, if we listen to Jesus, what did he say? When you look at the controversies that we face and the arguments that we get into with each other, what did Jesus say about that stuff? He didn't speak of judgment. He told us not to judge. He didn't speak about getting even or settling the score. He talked about forgiving. He didn't speak about the wisdom of the wise. He spoke of the kingdom of God and how children understood it. Listen to Jesus, and we hear a voice that promotes caring for the uncared-for and loving the unlovable. Doing for others, and hope. And we hear a message that gives us a chance to thrive in a world that primarily is pushing people, just "Can you survive?"

Dave Burchett wrote a book called *When Bad Christians Happen to Good People*. He challenges us Christians to be Christian. He says, "Sometimes our walkin' ain't matching our talkin'." He says, "All God's children got souls, even the annoying ones." He says, "Remember how Jesus wept? Jesus looks at some of what we do in his name, and he still weeps." Brennan Manning was right to say the greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and when they walk out the door, deny him with their lifestyle." Who's our authority. There's been discussion around the church about how we can promote and advertise our ministry to people who do not know us, so we can pass out more bags of popcorn. One of the suggestion is we

have bumper stickers on our cars. What if we had a bumper sticker, just imagine your car with a bumper sticker that says, "First United Methodist Church - Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Doors." Just imagine that. Good idea? No. Bad idea. Probably never happen, because we're going to have to, if we have the name of the church on our cars, a bunch of us are going to have to get some driving lessons. Because if we got that bumper sticker on our car, we gotta act like it, beginning with the clergy. Do we pass the test of authority? Do we listen to Jesus in what we do and say? Do we act like it?

Mike Mason wrote a book entitled *Practicing the Presence of People*, and he's got a whole chapter on "The Christ in You," and he knows the test of authority. He says, "Becoming a Christian begins with recognizing God in one human being, Jesus, but it goes on to the recognition of God's image in every person." The test of ego, the test of authority. We preach not ourselves. If we're Christian, we listen to Jesus.

Third test: What are we becoming? The test of evolution. This month marks the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, an ongoing debate between evolutionists and creationists, and that gets contentious sometimes. Frankly, I'm not so much interested in defending evolution of the species as I am concerned about the continuing evolution of the human spirit in all of us. I don't think we ever arrive, but always we change, and for the good, I hope. 0000000 tells a story about a physician in Arkansas who misdiagnosed a patient, and determined that the woman had died. The family was told, and the husband was grief-stricken beyond words. Later, a nurse came into the hospital room after everyone had left and discovered that the woman was not dead. She called the doctor back. She said, "You'd better tell the family." The doctor picked up the phone. The husband answered. The doctor said, "I need to talk to you about the condition of your wife." "Condition of my wife," he said. "She's dead." Then the doctor said, clearing his throat, "Well, she's seen a slight improvement."

It was Paul who wrote, "Let the light shine out of darkness." Let there be with all of us a slight improvement. Let us do something. Let us evolve. A week ago, the United Methodist Church lost a great preacher in Rod Wilmoth. Some of you may remember Rod when he preached here several years ago. A brilliant thinker, a remarkable church leader. He took his own life at age 72. He had written a book entitled *How United Methodists Share Their Faith*. At the beginning of one of the chapters of that book, I found these words. These are haunting words. Rod wrote, "There is no darkness quite like the darkness of despair. The darkness of dashed dreams can be overwhelming, leaving persons without any sense of hope." Rod Wilmoth brought light out of darkness, and his friends are stunned, and maybe re-dedicated, that we might evolve in our lives, since we could not bring our light into his darkness.

But Rod told a story in that book about the time he was asked to attend a banquet to honor a man who had been a general in the Salvation Army. The man stood up, began his remarks by saying he loved the opportunity to speak to a captive audience, because it gave him a chance to say something about his uniform, and Rod thought to himself, "This is going to be awful." It was wonderful. With his thumb under his right lapel, he pointed the brass button "S" toward the audience and said, "This button is very important. It tells

me I've been saved. And I realize that might not mean a lot to some of you here today, but it means everything to me." And then he put his thumb under his left lapel, and pointing the left brass button, along with the letter "S", toward the audience, he said, "This button stands for service." And then he got very serious and he said, "Friends, I have been saved for one reason and one reason only - to serve. And quite frankly, I grow weary of some of my Christian brothers and sisters who go through life pointing to the right button of being saved, and have no clue what the left button is all about." And Rod ends the story, "May we move from fear to faith. May we not only tell the story of Jesus' love, but be the story. May we evolve in faith."

Evolving, never staying put. Growing, never fixed in place. Showing slight improvement. Or as Bill Coffin said, "Striving to die young as late as possible." Then we pass the test of faith. Are we evolving? Are we listening to Jesus? Are we preaching not ourselves, the faith of a fanatic ego, authority, evolution, our test, the test? For all of us fanatics, the test is this, and we can give it to ourselves. It's a take-home exam. The next time we pray, when, if we close our eyes, what or whom do we see?

O God, in this world of conflicting ideas and beliefs about you, help us to bring light to darkness and to live the Gospel. Amen.