

*Life with Laity**

Philippians 3:10; 12b; 4:2, 3b

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I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his suffering by becoming like him in his death.... I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.... I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord... Help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel....

Dear Columbia Class of 2008:

All your study has come to this. Most of you, if not already, soon will be clergy, a condition I have had for thirty-three years. As pastor I have been privileged to work with some dreadfully earnest laity. I have served fine churches, congregations with impressive choirs, nice pensions, large organs. But I'll tell you the truth: I would rather be made at gunpoint to drive to New York City backwards, listening to Brittany Spears, than to go back and do church...with any of those laity...ever again.

Ah, the laity! You have spent years at Columbia, getting over being laity, so I figure that you are up for a misanthropic diatribe against the dear, sweet, simple, demanding, difficult, diffident laity.

As bishop, one of my jobs is to cop the credentials of clergy calling it quits. And I can tell you novices, I've never had a pastor throw in the towel because he was fed up with Jesus. It's the laity who do them in! The greatest challenge of the Christian ministry in any form is Jesus' command to work with the people whom Jesus has called to work with him. In support of my argument I call on my clerical colleague St. Paul. Here is Paul waxing eloquently to First Church Philippi on the glories of Christ, his death and resurrection, calling in his most impressive theological artillery:

Though he was in the form of God,
Did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
*But emptied himself...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess...*
(2:5ff.).

Here is the grandeur of the Christian faith, the full sweep of our theology! Then, as if he has finally gotten to what is really bugging him, Paul blurts out, "Euodia! Syntyche! Behave! Stop fighting. Be reconciled!" Amid the grandest theological affirmations, Paul calls out (by name, no less) two squabbling laity. What's this?

It's the church!

Sunday I'm putting finishing touches on my sermon on Philippians 2, a deft expo

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sition of the preexistence of Christ and its implications for people who drive Volvos. The door to my study swings open and a prepubescent acolyte screams, “Preacher, come quick! Euodia and Syntyche are squared off in the sacristy over whether it’s carnations or mums for Epiphany! Syntyche is threatening to bop Euodia with a memorial vase.”

How is it that St. Paul is forced to put up with such laity idiocy? How is it that you should give your life for this?

Three years ago I left academia. Sometimes people ask, “What do you most miss about life in the university, compared with your life now as church bureaucrat?” I answer: “I miss most the Duke Office of Admissions. The university Admissions Office insured that I would never be forced to work with anyone who was not like me – same background, same gifts for manipulating the system to my advantage. Church, on the other hand, is notoriously nonselective. We pastors are forced to work with anybody whom Jesus drags in the door!”

So there you are. You gave your life to Jesus and got stuck with Euodia and Syntyche. I know that you Presbyterians shy away from language of “laity” and “clergy.” More typical of the Reformed is to speak of people being ordained to various offices for the edification of the church. Well, you can pretty it up anyway you like. It’s still us against the laity.

“Spirituality” is all the rage — feeling religious, sort of, without the bother of having to be religious with people who are not as vaguely spiritual as you. Why? “Spirituality” is Jesus without the laity! Or, as the poet Shelley put it, “I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him that leprous bride of his, the church.”

I led a clergy conference in Hawaii. Before the meeting we toured the islands as sightseers. The guides told us, “Hawaii is a tropical paradise. Here, unlike where you’re from, all these ethnic groups live in love and harmony....” I believed it. Then I met with the pastors. “Harmony?” They complained of disjointed congregations where the Japanese think they’re better than the Koreans and the Koreans look down on the Samoans and everyone detests the Japanese as much as they despise the Anglos, and high rates of drug abuse, and shocking poverty. Leave it to the clergy, I thought – enmeshed with the laity – to discover the ugly underbelly of paradise.

I asked one of my M.Div. students, “Why are you headed toward ministry?”

He answered, “Because I enjoy working with people.”

I replied, “Dear, have you actually met any of the people with whom you will be working? What sort of masochist finds enjoyment in that?”

I have never had anyone withdraw from a church where I served saying, “Jesus’ demands upon us are just too much.” No, why they leave is, “We think the world of Jesus, but we just can’t stand his friends.”

There is a reason why Paul speaks of crucifixion, and then immediately recalls Euodia! Syntyche! Take my first congregation. Please. It was rural Georgia and as many of you have learned, rural doesn’t get much more rural than that. I, fresh from Yale Divinity School, all Bultmanned-Tillich-ed-up for grad school at Emory. Saturday before my first Sunday I went out to survey my church – a forlorn place that went by the utterly inappropriate name of “Friendship Methodist Church.” I noted a padlock on the front door.

The lay leader – a man so named because he laid carpet in Smyrna – informed me that the lock belonged to the Gwinnett County Sheriff who locked down the church

after a somewhat difficult church meeting. “People started ripping pews out of the floor and carting off stuff they had given to the church, so the Sheriff come out here and put that lock there until the new preacher could get here and sort things out,” he explained.

That typified my days there – squabbling, one failure after another, Euodia and Syntyche dooking it out in the parking lot after a wedding. It was more than I could take. One day, in youthful despair, I poured out my frustration to my favorite Emory professor. The horror — one such as I, with theological training such as mine, condemned to care for people like them?

My professor sympathetically listened to my tale of woe. He agreed to the injustice of someone like me forced to serve people like them. The laity are lousy. “And worst of all...,” he said, “Jesus says that whores and taxcollectors get to go into the Kingdom of God before us good people.”

Jesus teaches, preaches, heals and finally suffers and dies. And on his way to paradise, deserted by his own disciples, hanging in agony on the cross, Jesus enters paradise with nothing to show for his trouble but one slightly informed, somewhat penitent thief. Some trophy. And yet Karl Barth designates this gathering of Jesus and the two thieves as birthday of the church.

The Kingdom of God is a great banquet where though really nice people are the first invited, they find other things to do. In anger the master of the banquet goes out and invites everybody — the maimed, the lame, and the blind, the broken hearted, Republicans, Rotarians, rejects, racists, and reprobates. That’s God’s Table — a bunch of losers whom no nice person would be caught dead with on a Saturday night. So says Jesus.

“I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord....help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel....” For all their faults, these women are chosen by God as fellow strugglers with Paul in the “work of the gospel.” As those ordained, called, these women are like Paul, under orders to be reconciled.

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...,” says Paul. To whom did the resurrected Christ appear? Not to the *cognoscenti cleros*, but to the squabbling *laos* — fearful, misunderstanding women, according to the gospels. You know not the “power of his resurrection” until you know that Christ returned to those who forsook and disappointed him, to Euodia and Syntyche, and thus to you and thus to me. It’s a heck of a way to run a Kingdom of God, but it appears to be *His* way.

In response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” John Calvin said of course we think well of our friends and family, no great surprise in that. The odd thing is that Christ commands us to love our enemies. How is that possible? Calvin answers, “All should be contemplated in God, not in themselves.” If we look directly at the human race, says Calvin, unaided by God, we will feel more hate than love. We must look upon people as God looks at people. The ability not only to endure but also to love Euodia and Syntheche arises from our theological commitments.

The night I was ordained, when a bishop (a position whom many of you don’t believe in) laid hands on my head, the Holy Spirit descended neither in the singing of the choir nor in the presence of loving family and friends, but rather when the bishop intoned the ancient words of the Ordinal, “Never forget that the ones whom you serve are the beloved sheep of his fold for whom he died.”

I wondered, “Will the church appreciate my superior training and gifts? Will I get an all-electric parsonage?” The Ordinal shook me: Don’t forget kid, the ones you’re lucky enough to preach to, to weep with, and to join in looking out for the Kingdom are the ones for whom *he* died.”

Bless you for the guts to try to live with, lead, and maybe by God’s grace even to love the *laos* in Jesus’ name. The only good reason to be here is Christological. The only means of persevering to the end is that Jesus, in his wisdom, means this to be so.

One of my churches serves breakfast to close to two hundred homeless people every morning. I was there awhile back and on my way in noticed a man in the kitchen, washing dishes, up to his elbows in dishwater. (The pastor of the church believes that the homeless ought always to be served by the church on china rather than plastic.) I recognized the man as a lawyer, member of our largest, most affluent suburban congregation.

“I think it’s wonderful that you are here, washing dishes for the homeless,” I said to him.

“Good for you,” he mumbled, not looking up from his work.

“Have you always enjoyed ministry with the homeless?” I asked.

“Who told you I enjoyed working with the homeless?” he asked. “Have you met any of the homeless out there? Most of them are crazy, so addicted or messed up that nobody, not even their family, wants them home.”

“Well, I, er, uh, think that makes it all the more remarkable what you are here doing,” I said. “How did you get here?”

He looked up from the dishwater and replied, “I’m here because Jesus put me here. How did *you* get here?” Ah, the laity!

Budding theologians, fledgling leaders of the Body of Christ, I have little with which to commend to you the church, the People of God, this evening. I have no rationale that justifies throwing away your time and talents on the likes of Euodia or Syntyche.

Except this: *these are the ones whom the very Son of God loved and for whom he died and to whom he rose. Amen.*