

Turn or Burn

A couple of year's ago, I gave a talk on grace and faith at a men's spiritual retreat. Most of us there were mainline Presbyterians. There were a few scattered Methodists and a token Baptist or two. After my little talk, a fellow about my age came up to me.

For some reason he was impressed with me and what I had to say. He was a friendly little fellow, gregarious, kind, and soft-spoken all at once. He introduced himself as a Baptist lay-preacher, and jokingly called himself a Bapti-costal—a clever neologism describing a cross-pollinated hybrid between a Pentecostal and a Baptist.

I liked him; and he seemed to have really taken a liking to me, even though we had to be theological opposites of the most extreme variety. So we became friends.

I've never had a friend who loved to pray so much. He was all the time breaking out into prayer. He would pray sometimes for 20 or 30 minutes. Every phone conversation I had with him he wanted to end with prayer, and he'd begin every prayer, even public ones, with the same words: FATHER, FORGIVE ME FOR ALL MY SINS. He never really told me what all these sins were, but he was always asking God to forgive him for all his sins.

He shared with me his testimony: his coming to Jesus story of being rescued from drugs and listlessness and drab apathy; he became, almost overnight, a totally transformed, renewed, and tireless disciple of Christ. He read and studied the Bible with tremendous hunger, listened to preachers on the radio, and even signed up for Bible classes at a local college. He felt called to preach. At first, he just gave his testimony, but before long he was preaching and leading revivals.

By day he was a mild-mannered clerk; he kept the diary isle stocked at the local naval commissary; but at night he became a roaring lion, preaching in prisons throughout west Tennessee and north Mississippi.

I went with him once to the West Tennessee State Penitentiary. He was a little fellow; shorter and skinner than me, which is really saying something, I know. But he walked into that prison like a giant. Just about every inmate seemed to know who he was and most of them greeted him with a great big smile. Some even hugged him. They hugged me too. Not one of those tender hugs, but one of those manly hugs. You know how men hug each other. We men always pat each other on the back as if to say, "Yeah, I'm hugging you, but I'm also hitting you." He whispered to me later that the staff really discouraged that kind of thing, but he didn't have the heart to refuse their earnest affection for him.

We entered into the pod where he was to preach. It was but one of about 10 or 15 pods. It was a square-shaped, two-story enclosure which held about a hundred inmates. The floor of the pod was about the size of our sanctuary, and the cells holding the inmates encircled the floor on all sides and on the second floor as well. The inmates were all

milling around, only a few were in their cells. Most were down on the floor, sitting at tables talking and playing cards. In the center of the room was a little guard station. Surprisingly, almost all the guards watching these men were females. I thought it very strange. I bet female guards outnumbered male guards by two to one, easy.

The inmates came in every size shape and color you could imagine. Some were covered in tattoos and looked mean as snakes. Some looked like meek and mild, like they had been sent to prison for overdue library books. Let that be a warning to any of you who have overdue books out of our library.

When my friend entered the room, he was immediately greeted by a cadre of 20 or 30 inmates. There was more hugging going on than at your last family reunion. Manly hugging. They hugged me, too, and thanked me for coming and asked if I would come again.

Now, keep in mind that the ones who came up to greet us consisted of about one third of the inmates. The other 2/3 just ignored us. They just milled around quietly doing much of nothing. But, the ones who came up to meet us all had tattered Bibles with them. You've never seen Bibles like these—tattered, worn, underlined, dog-eared, taped together Bibles that these men held on to like life preservers.

Most of us Presbyterians don't bother to bring our Bibles to church and we certainly don't pay much attention to the Bibles before us in the pews, but these men held on to these old, worn, well-read, second-hand Bibles as if it was the only thing keeping them both alive and sane.

The men who gathered round us were no different in appearance than the ones who ignored us. They were of every race. Hispanic, black, white. And every age, too. From 20's to 60's and everything in between. Some big and sporting tattoos and scars; others meek and young, like pimply faced high-school students who took a wrong turn somewhere. The only difference between these men and the rest of the population was that they had Bibles and had gathered round a couple of tables. We prayed together.

And then my friend got up to preach. From this little man emerged what could only be described as a tsunami of roaring sound. It was an aural assault of hell-fire-and-brimstone preaching. It crashed over us like a giant, never-ending wave. He never seemed to take a breath; he just paced back and forth like an angry lion, screaming up a storm. His preaching was so loud that it actually hurt my ears.

It was the kind of preaching that would get a Presbyterian pastor fired. But it seemed to speak to this motley gathering of felons. He berated his listeners concerning every sin you can imagine; he screamed up a long litany of sin, from smoking crack to card-playing, which was still going at the other tables, the card-playing, that is. He told them that they could play their cards all the way to hell.

He preached against drinking and drugs and adultery and fornication. He told them about how all these things would just drag them right down into hell. And they gave him more AMENS and PREACH IT BROTHERS than casseroles at one of our Second Sunday luncheons.

He then talked about repentance, and that without faith and repentance, they wouldn't have any part of heaven. It would be eternal damnation. The sermon was one of those TURN-OR-BURN type of sermons, and it preached before these men. It preached big-time.

We mainline Presbyterians don't much like those kind of sermons, do we? It offends us to talk so much about sin, judgment, and damnation. We like our sermons to speak of grace and forgiveness and the Love of God.

We may even find such sermons theologically offensive. We recoil from the notion that our salvation is contingent on our own ability to turn, repent and believe. Worse, such sermons often led to the idea of Christian Perfectionism—that once we are in Christ, we must lead almost perfect lives to maintain our salvation. Once in Christ, sin should become so rare in our lives that it becomes the anomaly and not the norm.

We Presbyterians are much more comfortable with very low standards for the Christian life. Just don't do anything really bad, we tell ourselves. Just try to live a decent life. But, forget about trying to be perfect. You'll never get even close. So, just relax—a little sin in your life won't kill you.

Our text today challenges that view. It's a terrifying text to us mainline Presbyterians:

⁴Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.
⁵You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

It would be nice to discard such a text. Or at least ignore it. It's an uncomfortable little passage for us on a number of levels. But, what if it's true?

About 15 years ago in April of 1994, genocide erupted in Rwanda. In a burst of degenerate, vicious violence 850,000 Rwandans were killed over just three months. The alacrity of this African genocide exceeded even that of the Nazis.

Theologian and ethicist David Gushee asked how such brutality could have occurred in "the most Christianized country in Africa." Churches, seminaries, schools and benevolent organizations were scattered all over the country. Ninety percent of Rwandans claimed to be Christians. "And yet," Gushee writes, "all of that Christianity did not prevent genocide, a genocide which church officials did little to resist, in which a large number of Christians participated, and in which, according to African Rights,

'more people died in churches and parishes than anywhere else.'" (David P. Gushee, "Church Failure, Remembering Rwanda" in *The Christian Century*, April 20, 2004, p. 28)

Reflecting on Rwanda, but his words apply more broadly, David Gushee said:

"The presence of churches in a country guarantees nothing. The self-identification of people with the Christian faith guarantees nothing. All of the clerical garb and regalia, all of the structures of religious accountability, all of the Christian vocabulary and books, all of the schools and seminaries and parish houses and Bible studies, all of the religious titles and educational degrees - they guarantee nothing."

[Passage taken from a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Guy Sayles "We Will Be Like Jesus," www.day1.org]

Of course, this is not only true of Rwanda, but also of Nazi Germany, which was largely occupied by Christians who were either actively complacent or silently apathetic to the horrors around them. I'm sure some did nothing purely out of fear of being hauled off themselves to the nearest concentration camp.

We could even point closer to home. We could likewise condemn the American South for its appalling attitude toward the institution of slavery.

We may be Christians in name, but we cannot truly call ourselves Christians until we understand that, in being Christian, we must love our neighbors as ourselves; and furthermore, we must recognize that everyone is our neighbor, not just the folks who happen to reside next door.

We cannot afford to have a low view of Christian discipleship. If we do not turn in the direction of Christ, we will have no protection against the evil that burns in the human heart.

As Christians, we are called to a radical new way for being and doing and living. We cannot be content to live as the world. We cannot allow ourselves to harbor the world's hatred and make excuses for its violence. We must be peacemakers of the most radical sort, even being willing to bear our own bodies before the machines of violence and genocide that dehumanize and oppresses whole populations.

Preaching and advocating pacifism is often perilous and vocationally dangerous for us preachers. Nevertheless, I am convinced that we must learn to be the voice of peace; not advocates of war, especially preemptive war. Unless we stand as peacemakers, we may find that we have no stake in Christ's kingdom. WE may find ourselves instead, holding the sword that cuts down the helpless and injures the weakest.

Friends, what if John's words are true, what if:

⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.

⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.