

## Sermon: Getting Jesus In You

You know, sometimes even good theologians can disagree with each other- at least in matters of emphasis. I begin this morning by telling you of two such theologians, both of which I have had the pleasure to meet. In fact one of them I know quite well.

The first theologian I met while I was in seminary in Kansas City Missouri a long while back. Now this theologian was not one of my professors nor was he one of the visiting lecturers that came through from time to time. I met this theologian in a different way.

You see as seminarians, like many other students I suppose, we were often short on disposable income. Or to put it more bluntly, we were usually broke. So we were always on the lookout for something cheap or preferably something free to do. Well one Friday afternoon one of my fellow seminarians came home with a flyer in his hand that he had found stuck up on a telephone pole somewhere around town.

The flyer was an advertisement for an evangelist couple, brother and sister Hall, who were going to be holding a revival all weekend in the Grand Ballroom of the beautiful Empire Hotel in downtown Kansas City.

Now the Grand Ballroom of the beautiful Empire Hotel sounds like a rather upscale destination, don't you think.. But we knew enough about the Empire Hotel and where it was located to know that, although indeed it had once been a fine establishment, it was located in what was now a rather seedy part of town and the Empire Hotel had definitely seen its better days.

But...it was free and as seminarians we could consider it a learning opportunity, sort of an educational field trip, and it might just be a hoot, so that evening a group of us (I kid you not) piled into a VW minibus that belonged to one of the students and soon enough we rolled up in front of the formerly beautiful Empire Hotel in downtown Kansas City Missouri.

As we walked in the Grand Ballroom and made our way down the center isle brother and sister Hall were already upfront warming up the crowd, most of which looked like they had just wandered in off the street to find a warm place to hang out. We took our seats and I ended up sitting on the end, right there on the center isle, with a good view of everything.

Brother Hall was leaning back with his eyes closed in concentration as he played the saxophone and sister Hall was standing beside him tapping a tambourine on her leg as she soulfully sang out "I've been thrilled. I've been thrilled". When they finished the song sister Hall took a seat and brother Hall put away his saxophone and started to preach the gospel, or at least his own particular take on it.

He started right off by challenging what we had heard from other preachers, or as we might say today those "so-called" preachers. He said, "Now those other preachers are always telling you, you got to get Jesus in ya". By way of illustration he picked up a drinking glass, pulled his handkerchief out of the breast pocket of his blazer and stuffed it down in the glass.

"But the problem with just having Jesus In you" he said " is that the devil can still get at cha!" And he started slapping that glass all around with his hand and his big shiny ring was clanking on it and it sounded like that poor glass was surely going to shatter at any moment. And everyone in the crowd were convinced by clear illustration that we did not want the devil slapping us around like that.

But to save us from our dismay he preached on. "But what I'm here to teach you" he said "is how to get Jesus on ya!" And he grabbed the corner of that handkerchief pulled it out and waved it around his head like a matador's cape and brought it down safely covering that poor devil whooped glass.

"And when you got Jesus on ya, the devil can't get at cha!", he said and he began slapping around on that glass again but this time it was all protected by Jesus and so you could barely hear a thing and we all knew instantly that that was a much preferable state to be in, and more than a few folks jumped up and started clapping their own hands.

And then he started pacing back and forth and sharing all of the other benefits of having Jesus on you. He said that when he and sister Hall went to the grocery store and were ready to check out, someone always opened a new register and they would go right to the front without having to wait in line.

And he told about how he and sister Hall had gone on an evangelistic mission trip to somewhere in South America and they had been warned about the mosquitos there because they carried deadly diseases. But since they knew they had Jesus on them they didn't bother to bring mosquito nets or even any bug spray.

And sure enough when they went to their hotel room that first night to go to bed they looked up and there were two threatening looking mosquitos on the ceiling just waiting for them. But they went to bed knowing that Jesus was stronger than any old mosquito and so they slept like babies and the next morning those two mosquitos lay dead and defeated there on the sheet beside them.

And then he started talking about how Jesus smells really good and that when we have Jesus on us we will smell good too and we will never have body odor. And I can tell you from my personal experience there that this was a current and pressing issue with many of those there assembled.

By this time he was all revved up and he had gotten the crowd all revved up and I must admitted that I had gotten a little swept up in it too. Then suddenly he turned toward the crowd and he yelled out at the top of his voice "who wants to smell Jesus?", and my hand went up.

I thought it was sort of a rhetorical question and of course everyone would want to smell Jesus but as the room fell silent and I looked around, my hand was the only one up and everyone was looking at me.

I looked to my fellow seminarians, my now former friends, and they were grinning at me as if to say "you done stepped in it now son". And as I looked back toward the front there was brother Hall coming down the center isle in long strides right toward me.

4

He walked right up to me and asked me right low “Do you want to smell Jesus, son?”

and I figured I had come this far so I said, “Yes sir I do”.

So he told me “well stand up and step out here in the isle” and I did as I was told.

Then he said it again, louder this time, “Do you want to smell Jesus?”

and I repeated, “yes I do”.

Then he said, “well shout Hallelujah three times”

And I shouted “hallelujah , hallelujah , hallelujah!”

And then he grabbed me by the shoulders and he asked me “do you smell him son?”

And I said “No”.

But brother hall was prepared for such an answer (no doubt he had encountered souls as lost as mine before) so he said “that just goes to show you son, you are just getting singed tonight. You got to keep coming back all weekend until you get burned!”

But then he told me he appreciated my courage and sincerity and so he blessed me and told me that from here out the gas in my car would go further and that my feet would never stink again. I guess he thought that, given my obvious limitations, that was about as far up as I would ever be capable of getting Jesus on me... but my wife can attest to the fact that I haven't even accomplish that.

The other theologian I want to tell you about is one I know very well. In fact many of you do too. This theologian is my daughter Claire. Claire is now 20 years old and is in college but she taught me her lesson when she was only 5.

Claire has always been rather musical and so she started taking piano lessons when she was around 4 or 5. We were members of 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Boone at the time and at one point they were having a church talent show, much like we did here a few weeks ago.

Well Claire said she wanted to sign up to play the piano in the show. But Claire was very shy at that time so although we signed her up as she asked, I was convinced that she would back out at the last minute.

However, to my surprise and delight, when the night came for the talent show and when they called her name, Claire hopped right up, walked up there, played her little song and came back and sat down beside me as big as you please.

That night as we drove home I told her how proud I was of her and how brave she was to play in front of so many people. I told her that she didn't even seem nervous and she said that she had not been. She said, "I just said a prayer and I wasn't scared at all".

That, of course, did my heart good and I said to her, "I am so glad that you know that God is always with you". But she shook her head and gave me that look of reproach that I have seen many times since and said "God is not WITH me dad. God is IN me."

Two different theologians. Two different perspectives.

In brother Hall's theology, God is there to shield us and protect us from the world around us, keeping its struggles and dangers away. It is a theology that more of us believe in than we might think.

It is the belief that if we just believe and confess our unworthiness, then God will keep evil at bay and we will reap a reward at the end rather than the punishment we so justly deserve. It is the belief that once that is accomplished, all I am called to do is to be grateful and to sing God's praises for what God has done for me.

But in little Claire's theology, God is something always within us, that can empower us to bravely get up and go out and live and act in the world. And although I know that I am more than a bit biased, I think Claire got it right and I think the words of Jesus and the text from Leviticus agree as well.

In the text, God calls the people to holiness. "You shall be holy, for I...am holy". But the call, you see, is not so much a command as it is a promise. It is not a list of outdated rules we must keep in order to be MADE holy but rather a recognition of who we already are and the holiness that is already within us.

“You SHALL be holy” God tells the people, for I am your God. I live within you, I am a part of you and you are a part of me. “You shall be holy.. because I am holy”. So God’s call then becomes a call to recognition of who we are, a claiming of our own identity and finally a living out of our own true, God given, nature.

And then the text goes on to tell us something about what that nature looks like (what holiness looks like) when it is lived out in the world.

In the world of work (how we handle harvest and wages)

In the world of interpersonal relationships (how we treat the weak, the disadvantaged, the poor)

and even in our thoughts and emotions (how we handle feelings of hatred and our desire for vengeance).

Being created in the image of God, you see, does not refer to a physical likeness, but rather a moral potentiality, the God infused possibility of a life lived with honesty, integrity, justice, charity and love.

There is not a single word in the text about the consequences of not hearing and heading the call. Holiness cannot be enforced. It is a call to be willingly transformed by God’s holy presence within us.

This call to holiness was counter cultural. This was not the way the world usually operated. It was not the common practice at the time. The call to holiness is and always has been a call to be different.

It is the life that Jesus calls us to as well when he says we are to be “perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect”. The word that is translated here as “perfect” is the Greek word telos and it is not so much about moral perfection as it is about reaching one’s intended purpose. The telos of an arrow shot by an archer is to reach the target. The telos of a grape vine is to produce grapes.

So when Jesus tells us to be perfect, he is essentially saying “be the person you were created to be”. You are a child of God and this is how God’s family, our family, lives in the world.

We turn the other cheek, we give more than we have to, we willingly go the extra mile. We treat friends and enemies alike just as God makes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. As God's children, it is just what we do. It is just who we are.

And this is counter cultural now, as well. It is not the usual way of operating. In our tribal mentality we tend to separate people into us and them. If there are neighbors there must be strangers, if there are friends there must be enemies. Loving our friends and neighbors is what everyone does but loving those we deem to be enemies and strangers challenges the perceived differences between us.

But to do so, I mean to really do so, is not easy. It is more than just managing to be nice and to leave well enough alone. Love, as Jesus reveals to us is risky and messy. It is worked out in real relationships across time, through the challenges and sometimes conflicts that are inevitably a part of every relationship.

But loving as Jesus reveals, giving to those who have nothing to give in return, forgiving even those who will never ask for our forgiveness, loving even our enemies, embodies the perfection and holiness of God and that is who we are and who God will empower even us to be.

A so called preacher once told me that God is there to shield us and protect us from the world around us, keeping its struggles and dangers at bay. But a five year old little girl once SHOWED me that God is always within us, and can empower us to bravely get up and go out and live and act in the world. We are holy and perfect. Now may we claim and live who God has made us to be.