

“Faith in Action”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
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I Peter 4:12-16, 5:5-11 Sermon
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If you read my piece in the June newsletter, you know that the Center for Progressive Christianity recently threw a little bit of a wrench into my plans to preach on each of their 8 Points. Just as I was beginning my sermon series, they updated their 2003 list for 2011! A few points were replaced altogether, and many were assigned new numbers. It’s a bit confusing, but not insurmountable, I think.

Before this update occurred, I had decided to preach on what *was* Point 8 because it corresponded to today’s epistle lectionary passage. The old Point 8 was the statement that seemed to present the greatest challenge for people who spoke up at our recent congregational meetings. Here is how it used to go:

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

That very strong, direct statement has since been revised to

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean we are Christians who commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.

It certainly sounds a lot more inviting and doable now, doesn’t it? We are nothing if not a congregation of compassionate lifelong learners who strive to be selfless in our love. But in losing its teeth, has Point 8 also relinquished its essential challenge? Or has it just become more relevant to where *we are* today, as opposed to where the people of the Early Church in Peter’s day were. I mean, seriously, how can we even begin to imagine what it would have been like to be part of a brand-new religion associated with someone who, in recent memory, had been

executed by the state for his political subversiveness? How can we imagine what it would have been like to be in the minority—just a few Christians amidst a lot of pagans and some Jews. To have to meet privately in homes and identify one another with secret symbols to avoid discovery, persecution, and even a very violent, public death.

Certainly none of us signed on for any of this when we began singing “Jesus Loves Me” as small children in Sunday School or when we were confirmed as adolescents or when we joined or started attending church as adults. In fact, this may well have been *the furthest* thing from our minds. We came for the community--to be with our friends and make new friends. We came for the music, maybe for some education, some comfort and inspiration and once in awhile a little bit of challenge, for a place to do some good work and hear again how much God loves us. We came not to be singled out for suffering, not to fight cosmic battles against forces of evil, not to pay too high a price for the privilege of belonging to a church family or of being mostly white middle class persons in a world filled with a lot more darker, poorer people, many of whom have helped to make our comfortable, convenient lifestyles possible. Not something we especially want to think about, especially on a beautiful early summer weekend.

And, believe me, I'm there with you. None of these things is easy to contemplate. And the world is, indeed, a very different place from Jesus' and Peter's days. To a certain extent, they only had to deal with what was right in front of them. Without radio or TV, the Internet or cell phones, they didn't have to know what was going on half a world away: that cheap goods were being mass produced in sweatshops in China, that human beings were being trafficked and exploited for forced sex and labor in Vietnam and many other places, or that many, even at home, were

risking their lives each day working in mines widely known for cutting corners. And the list goes on.

An overwhelming list of tragic situations, injustices we can barely begin to process or touch before the next one is on the horizon, vying for our attention. Sometimes we try to narrow our focus and just tend to our own *local* situations, to help our *actual* neighbors. But ultimately the fact that we're *all* connected is all but impossible to ignore these days. As well as that, to a certain extent, our own middle class lifestyles come at these very high costs to other human beings. We are able to have because others have not--*or not nearly enough*—and are forced to work in untenable situations for unfair wages, keeping prices affordable to the rest of us. And therein lies much of the *privilege* the old Point 8 called upon us to renounce, as well as the *evil* it asked us to conscientiously resist. That is, *systemic evil* so big and tightly woven into our economy and our very way of being in the world it's all too easy overlook. It can't be pinned on one person or organization. We unknowingly participate in it just by going about our normal lives.

How terribly different are these realities from the disparities Jesus and the prophets called out thousands of years ago? And what kind of consequences did they face for boldly naming exactly what they saw? Think of the prophet Jeremiah left in a cistern to die or Jesus nailed upon a cross, both for having addressed the relationships between self-centeredness, greed, injustice, and poverty.

But, not to worry, this is 2011, when progressive Christians need only *commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love*. Take some classes, participate in some book studies, do some volunteer work, and call it a day... Perhaps... But at a certain point all that

knowledge, empathy, and love are likely to overflow, moving us outside of our comfort zones and opening our mouths. Which, in turn, is bound to ruffle a few feathers and generate some push-back. Now this is not to say that we should actively court controversy. Indeed, we should always seek to be strategic in our methods and diplomatic in our words. But, at a certain point, all the strategy and sensitivity in the world won't hold the world's defensiveness at bay. And, according to the author of I Peter, this is not something that should surprise us. Integrity comes with the territory of fully living into our identities as followers of Jesus. And that very integrity stirs up the wrath of corporate and political lions who have everything invested in maintaining the status quo.

I believe all of this leads us to the old Point 5, which is now known as Point 4:

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe.

Stated even more succinctly, "What would Jesus do?" I don't know that I've ever heard someone say, "What would Jesus believe?" or seen any WWJB bracelets or bumper stickers. And with good reason. At the end of the day, Jesus was all about faith in action, breaking the laws of his religion if and when necessary to restore broken people to wholeness and community...and to name the cultural norms that had broken them in the first place.

As more and more progressive Christian scholars and clergy predict the end of the Church as we know it, one point often made is that the institutional Church's focus must be restored to relevance. As Jesus' own rule breaking demonstrates, he likely would never have been a stickler for formulaic church doctrine. If anything, he thought *outside* the box. His was a lived faith

dictated by love of God and neighbor on this earth and in this life. Thus, almost by definition, Christianity could be viewed as a faith grounded in *orthopraxy*—right action—as opposed to the *orthodoxy*--the right belief--that would later be imposed. Actions have *always* spoken louder than words and will continue to do so.

If key parts of Christianity must die in order to be reborn, then we may well find ourselves a minority, like the Early Church of Peter's day. In fact, I think oftentimes we already do. And that's not an easy place to be. But we can rest assured knowing that there is precedent for this, that it may even signal that we're on the right track, blazing trails as we've been known to do in this church. Most importantly, we can know that God is here with us and has explicitly invited us to cast all your anxieties on God's self, because God cares for us. Minority or not, ridiculed or not, suffering or not, we are never, ever alone on this path of faith in action: life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.

Amen.