

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

Year C

January 14, 2006 Randal B. Gardner

This morning I would like to submit to you that we who are followers of Jesus Christ, and we who must keep his church going and keep it alive, have certain basic guidelines to follow. Somewhere behind the dim mist of eternity, God set forth his guidelines. And through his prophets, and above all through his son Jesus Christ, he said that, "There are some things that my church must do. There are some guidelines that my church must follow." And if we in the church don't want the funds of grace cut off from the divine treasury, we've got to follow the guidelines. The guidelines are clearly set forth for us in some words uttered by our Lord and Master as he went in the temple one day, and he went back to Isaiah and quoted from him. And he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." These are the guidelines.

In the final analysis the church has a purpose. The church is dealing with humanity's ultimate concern. And therefore it has certain guidelines that it must follow.

Let us first think of the fact that if the church is following its guidelines, it seeks to heal the broken-hearted. Now there is probably no human condition more tantalizing than a broken heart. You see, broken-heartedness is not a physical condition; it's a condition of spiritual exhaustion. And who here this morning has not experienced a broken heart? I would say broken-heartedness comes basically from the trying experience of disappointment. And I don't believe there are many people here this morning under the sound of my voice who have not been disappointed about something.

Sunday after Sunday, week after week, people come to God's church with broken hearts. They need a word of hope. And the church has an answer—if it doesn't, it isn't a church. The church must say in substance that broken-heartedness is a fact of life. Don't try to escape when you come to that experience. Don't try to repress it. Don't end up in cynicism. Don't get mean when you come to that experience. But the church must tell people that Good Friday's as much a fact of life as Easter; failure is as much a fact of life as success; disappointment is as much a fact of life as fulfillment. And the church must tell people to take your burden, take your grief and look at it, don't run from it. Say that this is my grief and I must bear it. Look at it hard enough and say, "How can I transform this liability into an asset?"

This is the power that God gives you. He doesn't say that you're going to escape tension; he doesn't say that you're going to escape disappointment; he doesn't say that you're going to escape trials and tribulations. But what religion does say is this: that if you have faith in God, that God has the power to give you a kind of inner equilibrium through your

pain. So let not your heart be troubled. A voice rings out, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden." As if to say, "Come unto me, all ye that are heartbroken, and I will give you rest." And the rest that God gives is the rest that passeth all understanding. The world doesn't understand that kind of rest, because it's a rest that makes it possible for you to stand up amid outer storms, and yet you maintain inner calm. If the church is true to its guidelines, it heals the broken-hearted.

Secondly, when the church is true to its guidelines, it sets out to preach deliverance to them that are captive. This is the role of the church: to free people. This merely means to free those who are slaves. Some churches aren't concerned about freeing anybody. Some churches face the fact Sunday after Sunday that their members are slaves to prejudice, slaves to fear. And the preacher does nothing to free them from their prejudice so often. Then you have another group sitting up there who would really like to do something about racial injustice, but they are afraid of social, political, and economic reprisals, so they end up silent. And the preacher never says anything to lift their souls and free them from that fear. And so they end up captive.

Some people are suffering. Some people are hungry this morning. Some people are still living with bigotry and discrimination this morning. I'm going to preach about it. I'm going to fight for them. Every now and then I'll have to agonize and suffer for the freedom of God's children. I even may have to die for it. But if that's necessary, I'd rather follow the guidelines of God than to follow the guidelines of human society. The church is called to set free those that are captive, to set free those that are victims of the slavery of segregation and discrimination, those who are caught up in the slavery of fear and prejudice.

And then the church, if it is true to its guidelines, must preach the acceptable year of the Lord. You know the acceptable year of the Lord is the year that is acceptable to God because it fulfills the demands of his kingdom. Some people reading this passage feel that it's talking about some period beyond history, but I say to you this morning that the acceptable year of the Lord can be this year. And the church is called to preach it.

The acceptable year of the Lord is any year when people decide to do right.

The acceptable year of the Lord is any year when people will stop lying and cheating.

The acceptable year of the Lord is any year when people will stop throwing away the precious lives that God has given them in riotous living.

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when people will learn to live together as brothers and sisters.

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when people will keep their theology abreast with their technology.

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when people will keep the ends for which they live abreast with the means by which they live.

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when people will keep their morality abreast with their mentality.

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when people will do unto others as they will have others do unto themselves.

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when people will love their enemies, bless them that curse them, pray for them that despitefully use them.

The acceptable year of the Lord is God's year.

These are our guidelines, and if we will only follow the guidelines, we will be ready for God's kingdom, we will be doing what God's church is called to do. We won't be a little social club. We won't be a little entertainment center. But we'll be about the serious business of bringing God's kingdom to this earth.

*Excerpted from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,
from a sermon delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, on 5 June 1966.*

Friends, what I have spoken so far have not been my own words, but the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from a sermon delivered to Ebenezer Baptist Church in 1966. Even though I did not craft the phrases, and though I have not stood with King in the midst of the struggle for racial justice in the South, I share these words with you today with personal conviction and belief, finding in King's words the expression of my own faith and longing. Few Christians have had more influence over my theology and practice of the faith than Dr. King, and in many ways he is one of my spiritual teachers.

It is hard to give up such a delectable gospel as this from the second chapter of John, but I will take just a moment to connect that gospel story to King's guidelines for the church.

There are all kinds of ways in the history of each of our lives, in the history of our church, that we come to that moment when the wine has run out and the jars for purification have dried up. It happens for us in our personal lives, when talent, skill, determination, and vocation no longer suffice to carry us forward; and we find it hard to muster the personal energy to carry on. This can happen in our jobs, in our key relationships, in our work as parents, and in our participation in the community of faith. And in those hours, we face a decision about how we are to cope. If we decide to rely solely on our own strength, on the personal will power and effort to regain momentum and focus, we run a great risk. We may, by a resumption of determination, be able to carry on as if we were not running on empty. We may be able to fake out most people with our eager hugs and our well learned smiles. But the risks of such private and solitary effort to do it alone are many -- depression, addictions, relationship troubles, bad temper, frenzy, blame and shame.

The reminder of this gospel is that at those hours of emptiness, the true way ahead is to turn to our Savior for renewal. If you will do your part and keep coming to Sunday services, I will do my part and flesh out more and more of the details about how that renewal takes place. But for this morning simply let me offer this focus -- in our Savior Jesus Christ those periods of emptiness and insufficiency stand ready to be transformed into a renewed draught of life even better than what we had managed to create through our own effort. The empty pitchers and vessels stand ready to be refilled by a spiritual energy that is first of all like fresh water, and soon becomes living water, a drink of wine better than the vintage we thought was the "good stuff." There are ways, in practices of spiritual exercises and in honest friendship with fellow Christians, to let personal emptiness become a time of deeper connection with Christ, a time of spiritual renewal.

King's guidelines have to do with the church being a body gathered for the sake of drawing upon spiritual energy for new life, for the new Kingdom of God's making. Ours is a church where there have been seasons when the celebration suffered for the lack of enough for everybody to drink, for the sake of having "my wine" and "your wine." So we recommit, not to me nor to the choir nor to the event or program we support, but to Christ. We commit to Christ, and trust that in him, the wine that is to be served next is better than what we had prepared by our own decisions and our own efforts.