

The Intolerance of Christianity

[Matthew 3: 1-12]

K Karpen, Sunday, December 5, 2004

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one is more powerful than I is coming after me...He will baptize you with the holy spirit of fire."

Today I would like you to think through with me the topic of "the intolerance of Christianity." I raise this not because it is a pleasant topic; I know it's not. I raise this not because the theme is Christmassy, going so well with our wonderfully decorated sanctuary. I know better.

I raise the issue of the intolerance of Christianity because it is a fit topic for the season of Advent, the season of repentance, rebirth, re-creation, and preparation. I raise it because it is thrust at us through the centuries by the bad boy of Advent, St. John the Baptist, aka the Grinch who stalls Christmas.

I raise it because it is a topic we run into almost every day when we open the paper or turn on the news. And I raise this topic because it is something we in the Christian movement have to

deal with,
move through,
come to terms with, and
be honest about

if we are to move ahead and reclaim our place as followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

One of the things that pushed me to speak to this topic, of course, was the church trial this week of Rev. Beth Stroud. The very expression "church trial" sounds strange and disturbing to a lot of us; the expression itself is enough to bring up the topic of the intolerance of Christianity.

Beth Stroud is the United Methodist pastor from Philadelphia who was tried, convicted, and defrocked this week for being honest and forthright about her long-term, committed relationship with a woman. For me, the whole thing feels a little personal. Beth worshiped here with us from time to time in the mid-90's while she was in seminary.

I know she struggled so hard to come to terms with a strong call from God to ministry that sometimes seemed to her to contradict her commitment to be honest about who she was. Was God making some kind of mistake? Was she? Was the church?

The outcome of Beth's trial was one that I think seemed to satisfy only church legalists, and in the Methodist Church, those are hard to find; people who say: There's a rule! She broke the rule! The rest of us, whether liberal or conservative, are left a little queasy by the idea of a competent, gifted pastor being defrocked in a church that puts up with all kinds of nonsense & incompetence. Whatever you may think about all this, it is time to think through just what place intolerance has in the life of the church of Jesus.

The word "tolerate" comes from an old, old root, older than Latin or Greek, that means to lift, to bear, to carry. The question we raise when we ask what should the Christian faith tolerate, is: What should we bear; what are we expected to carry; what do we need to be able to lift together?

For all that physicality, that emphasis on lifting, bearing, carrying, "tolerance" is not a very strong word. It's a word I've come to dislike in my interfaith work. When you tolerate someone whose beliefs are different from your own, it really just means you put up with them. In more archaic speech you might say you "suffer" them. In a medical sense, doctors speak of our "tolerating" any drug that doesn't make us throw up or knock us out.

Jesus never asks us to "tolerate" anybody. Love them, sure. Serve them, certainly. Pray for them, absolutely. Tolerate them? Jesus couldn't be bothered. It's only our current politically charged context of religious animosity and difference that makes tolerance seem like a virtue. It's not the ideal. But maybe it's a pre-condition.

Of course, into our musings about intolerance, comes John the Baptist, a guy who's out there. A guy who calls it like he sees it. A guy who refuses to mince words. A guy who munches bugs for breakfast, who yells a lot, and who smells like a camel (the Bible says). Not a guy who practices tolerance and not a guy who invokes or asks for our tolerance either. John doesn't demand tolerance. John demands honesty, brutal honesty of himself & everyone else.

John detests hypocrisy, in anybody. When he sees religious leaders of the left (Pharisees) and the right (saducees) coming to see him, he can't contain himself. He doesn't set up shop in the middle of the wilderness because he likes to be around people who care only about their own power & position and institutional preservation. He says, "You brood of vipers! Sons of snakes! Who warned you to flee from the fiery wrath to come? Don't come here jumping in the water. Show by your life that you repent of yourself. And if you think I'm bad, just wait for the guy who's coming next." That's my translation...

I wonder what John thought when Jesus finally actually came around. Because if John shows us how to practice radical intolerance, Jesus shows us how to practice radical love. Jesus himself summarizes the difference between John's austere, stern approach to faith and Jesus' own laid-back, laissez-faire approach:

"For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon;' The son of man came eating & drinking and they say, 'Look! A glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

The other day I ended a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* about a British evangelical with the uncharitable line: "Why are we Christians constantly asked to look up to people Jesus would never want to have a beer with?" When I saw it in print I realized I had said more about me than about Jesus.

Jesus is the guy who'll have a beer with anybody—literally or figuratively. He eats & drinks with corrupt officials, religious rejects, and Pharisees, too, according to the Gospel.

The other night I was at Bnai Jeshurun for an evening celebrating the work of Rabbi Marshall Meyer of blessed memory. His son Gabi was on the panel, and he was asked by someone what he thought we should do about the rise of the religious right, both here and in Israel where Gabi lives and does prophetic work with Jews and Muslims and Christians through music. Gabi's response was strange. He told the questioner: "If I were you, I'd start with the religious right inside you; inside all of us; inside me." He said, "Until we recognize the part of us that is intolerant, forget about addressing the religious right."

As Christians, Jesus is our model for openness and honesty, for humility, and compassion, even when dealing with our supposed enemies. The one who says to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be God's children. Do not judge so you will not be judged. Do to others as you wish they would do to you.

The Christian faith does not require tolerance. That would be too easy. The Christian faith requires compassion. And because of that love and compassion, the Christian faith requires us to be intolerant. What surprises me when I think about something like the Beth Stroud trial is not how intolerant we are as a church.

What surprises me is how very, very tolerant we are. We are tolerant of a situation & procedure that baptizes bigotry and dresses it in a cloak of church discipline and respectability. We are too tolerant of those on the left and right who respond in

arrogant self-righteousness instead of seeking God's righteousness in humility. We are tolerant of a reaction in ourselves that gives in to hopelessness and despair. We are tolerant of a church that will put up with anything in order not to rock the boat.

I'm done with tolerance. It's time for a little holy intolerance. To speak the truth in fiery love. To give up on those parts of me that want to just go along with things that aren't right.

It's time for some holy intolerance of the parts of us that give in to doubt and despair. The parts of us that make us throw up our hands instead of throwing open our arms in radical love.

Chris Paige, the partner of Beth, sent an e-mail yesterday that began with the words: "This is the day that the Lord has made..." As I read it, it became clear that Chris and Beth have not gotten lost in hate and self-righteousness, or despair and doubt either. She spoke of witnessing the grace and power of the Holy Spirit at work in the church during the trial.

She says, "Please know that there is still love and laughter and joy in our lives. Beth still loves God. Beth still loves the United Methodist Church. Beth still reads her Bible daily; has a relationship with Jesus Christ, and seeks to be obedient to the leadings of the Holy Spirit in her life and ministry."

Oh to be more like Beth. Oh, to be more like Jesus. Oh, to spend our days urging our beloved church to try to catch up to Jesus.