

*Have You Found What You're Looking For? Part Three*  
*Isa 35: 1-10, Luke 1: 47-55, Jas. 5: 7-10, Mt 11: 2-11*  
*December 16, 2007*

There is an old saying familiar to golfers: “The worst day on the golf course is still better than the best day in the office.” As a golf enthusiast there are only a few days when I have found this not to be true. I love golf. But a few months ago I had the golf round from Hell. I went out as a single early one morning and was paired with a Californian visiting on business. My first impression of this man was that he was smug, all about his golf game, and not interested in conversation with a stranger. Then he asked me what I did for a living. I told him I was a preacher. He suddenly became very talkative and inquisitive about my ministry. This fellow was a member of a well-known evangelical *mega church* in Southern California. He asked me about Bering. I told him about our mission and ministry. I told him about our reconciling witness. Well, let the engaging dialog begin. We debated everything – homosexuality, Biblical interpretation, salvation, you name it. He seemed particularly obsessed with end-time prophecy and last days, what theologians term *eschatology* – the rapture, millennialism, and where his eternal soul fit within God’s salvation plan. It seemed to me all about his personal salvation. Now I have a term for this – spiritual narcissism – it is the phenomenon when all one can worry about is about their personal salvation and place in Heaven. I felt almost nauseous. First, all I wanted to do was enjoy Sabbath rest through a peaceful round of golf. His closing words to me were, “See you in Heaven!” I drove away in my cart as fast as I could. I did not want this fellow to be the first person I might meet in heaven!

I felt toward this man the way I sometimes feel about John the Baptist. His view seemed so filled with God's housecleaning at a time of terrible judgment. It felt frightening and coercive. I wonder how John felt as he wrote from that prison cell, "Are you (Jesus) the one who is to come or should we expect another?" John had known all his life the beauty of the outdoors. He had spent his life in the wilderness as a mystic experiencing God in nature. Sure it was solitude but very different from a dark, cruel prison cell. And now he was utterly alone, perhaps knowing of his imminent execution. If we were to ask JB if he found what he was looking for in Jesus, he would probably say "No!" Where was Jesus' winnowing fork? Where was the fiery judgment? Notice Jesus' response, which echoes the prophetic words of Isaiah – "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is preached to the poor." Jesus points not at judgment, not at spiritual narcissism but at social action. Jesus always refuses the coercive attempts to talk about the timing of end-time judgment. The Kingdom for Jesus is always about the dynamic present.

I rarely find myself espousing the views of John Dominic Crossan but I find him absolutely correct on this question of what are we looking for in our search for God's Kingdom. Crossan says:

"The difference I see between John the Baptist and Jesus is, to use some fancy academic language that, John is an apocalyptic eschatologist. An eschatologist is somebody who sees that the problem of the world is so radical that it's going to take some kind of divine radical solution to solve it. One type, for example, is John. God is going to descend in some sort of a catastrophic event to solve the world. There is another type of eschatology. And that's what I think Jesus is talking [about]. I'm going to call it ethical eschatology. That is the demand that God is making on us, not us on God so much as God on us, to do something about the evil in the world. In an apocalypse, as it were, we are waiting for God. And in ethical eschatology, God is waiting for us. That's, I think, what Jesus is talking

about in the Kingdom of God. It's demand for us to do something in conjunction with God. It is the Kingdom of God. But it's the Kingdom on earth of God.”

Hear the key point of what of Crossan is saying. In addressing the evil injustices of the world, rather than waiting for God, maybe God is waiting for us. Jesus said himself, “The kingdom of Heaven is among you.” And that realm of God that we hear in the verbs that Jesus uses in his response to JB are all active verbs – and they are verbs of love. The root of the word “salvation” is “salvus” which means healing. More than any other aspect of Jesus’ ministry in the gospel accounts we see Jesus as loving healer.

But before we get too critical of our friend JB, hear also what Jesus says about him. He was the “greatest of anyone born of women.” Since this is the only current method of entry into humanity, that is high praise, is it not? And then Jesus says something very confusing – “yet the one who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he.” So let’s try some theological reasoning here. If Jesus marked in his lifetime the first Advent, and we live in that in-between time in which the Kingdom is now present in our midst – that would mean that all of us are greater than JB. Wow? How can that be? What do we have in the Christian community that JB did not have? Two things – the cross and the flame, that is, the Holy Spirit.

What was accomplished on the cross came after the death of JB. Sadly, JB was executed shortly after our story today. He never on this Earth became a follower of Jesus or experienced the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The power of the cross is available to you and me – to change lives and to free us from our own mortality and the separation that we know with a loving God, who wants community with you and me more than we can ever imagine. That is the truly good news of this curious statement by Jesus: that those who call themselves “followers of the way” are greater than this

amazing person John the Baptist. And we have a comforter that JB did not have as a gift which is the Holy Spirit poured out on you at your baptism. The Holy Spirit is the source not only of God's presence in your life, but of all the spiritual gifts that you possess to build up this body we call the church, and the source of the peace, love, and serenity that we all want for our lives. Now isn't that what we are all are looking for? That's the *kingdom come when all colors bleed into one...it's because Jesus broke the bonds and loosed the chains, carried the cross of all our shame* (Bono).

The cross and the flame... Speaking of the cross and flame, did you know that those are also the symbols of the United Methodist Church? As many of you know, we visited our leader of the Texas Annual Conference, Bishop Janice Riggle Huie, this past Thursday. Gary, Lynette and I made a call on the Bishop and we appreciate your prayers for that gathering. We owe you a report of what happened from that meeting. We had several objectives in our conversation with the Bishop. We wanted to invite her to come preach to Bering in early 2008 and to converse directly with the congregation. We wanted to understand her perspective on the events at First UMC in Conroe in which the senior pastor was placed on sabbatical after the division caused in that church over his support for full inclusion of his gay son. Finally, I wanted to have the opportunity to ask her, "or you the one or should we wait for another?" That is what I wanted to discern - whether the Bishop might be a prophetic voice for Bering in its quest for social justice in the UMC for full inclusion. So what happened? First, let me tell you how much I respect our Bishop for her gifts of administrative leadership and many of the good things she has brought to our Annual Conference and to our denomination. She has led the institution of some important changes aimed at the decline of the United Methodist Church in the U.S.

The other good news is that she looks forward to coming to see Bering, probably in the fall of 2008. She has repeatedly remarked to others and me how much she values Bering in the UM connection. I believe that Bishop Huie's actions of recommending and facilitating Bill Taylor's sabbatical were motivated by compassion for Bill and his family and for healing and the restoration of unity in that congregation.

But I also must tell you that I believe that Bishop Huie's more pressing priorities are for the growth of the denomination and for its unity, and not for the prophetic call for full inclusion for GLBT people. Don't expect anytime soon for Bishop Huie to be our advocate. I predict that she will move slowly, cautiously and indirectly in this dialog, with her primary objective to keep a kind of unity within our Annual Conference. And that makes me sad. So after giving us a generous slice of her mid-day schedule, we held hands together as she led us in prayer and we left still searching for the hope that she did not give us.

So where do we go from here? I am not sure. We need to figure that out together. Have we found what we are looking for? Not yet. Is our Bishop the one who will lead us toward full inclusion in the United Methodist Church or should we expect another? I am afraid we should expect another. But before we hang our heads in the dark prison of our solitude, remember what Jesus says to us today and forgive me for my modernization, "Give a report of what you see and hear – the poor are fed in the kitchens of SEARCH, those without homes receive housing through Habitat for Humanity, young children are spared death from malaria through Nothing but Nets, disenfranchised youth break bread together and receive hope through an Open Gate, those affecting by HIV/AIDS receive spiritual and physical healing, and the spiritual lives of GLBT people

are resurrected by the loving witness of Christ at Bering Memorial UMC. Blessed are you who do not fall away because of these words!