

## A REDUCED FAITH

1 Corinthians 13:12

Jeremiah 20:7-18

Exodus 4:21-26

Imagine going to New York City for the first time and having half a day to be in the city and there's only enough time to visit the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building.

I would call that a greatly reduced trip to the Big Apple, taking just a few bites out of the apple.

Or, imagine going to see the movie Shrek. Isn't that a great movie! Imagine that right when you were leaving to go to the movie the phone rang and it was one of your parents, someone with whom you had to talk to a minimum of five minutes, and because of the phone call, and because you had to park at the outer limits of Mongolia, and because someone had to stand in the concession stand line that was a mile long, you miss the first ten minutes of the film. And let's say you have your cell phone set on stun, I mean set on vibrate, and the phone rings with 20 minutes left in the movie and with your caller ID you know it's your teenager and you imagine something bad has happened to them, and you get out of your seat and go to the hallway and by the time you get back in the theatre the only thing on the screen are the credits. That would be a greatly reduced movie experience, wouldn't it?

Or, let's say you have a big test coming up on a book you were supposed to have read and time is running out, time is of the essence, so you purchase Cliff Notes. You don't read the book, you read the Cliff Notes. Time to confess. If you have ever done that, raise your hand. Shame on you. You are bad, bad, bad. Reading only the Cliff Notes, your knowledge of the book has been greatly reduced, even if, even if you got an "A" on the test you lucky devil.

Here's a final illustration for this sermon introduction, an illustration appropriate for Father's Day. Let's say your parents got divorced. And let's say you were put in the custody of your mother. And let's say that even though your father had visitation rights he didn't take advantage of those rights. Or, let's say your parents, your father and mother, are not divorced. But even though your father slept at the house, ate at the house, worked in the yard, said hello and goodbye and asked, "How was your day?", let's say you didn't get very much fathering. Let's say you got a reduced father experience.

Reductionism. I want to talk to you this morning on the topic of reductionism. There are many ways to define reductionism, but for now, let's just think of reduction as missing out, missing out on all New York City has to offer, missing out on seeing every second of a hilarious movies, missing out on the syntax, the phraseology of an author, missing out on all the love and care and attention a person needs from a father.

I bring up this topic of reductionism because my read of churches, including Wedgewood, my read on Christians, including me, is that we miss out on quite a bit of stuff. We focus on one thing to the neglect of many other things. Or, we accept the truth of our own positions without acknowledging other truth.

I'll give you three types of examples that illustrate the problem of reductionism in churches, examples from the areas of theology, the Bible, and ritual.

Let's talk theology first. Pull out your bulletin insert. It's a sheet which outlines how denominations emphasize different parts of the trinity and how various religious groups have diverse understandings on such matters at what the church is, the relationship of Church and State, the role of a minister, and what modes of perception are underscored in the practice of worship.

We will not go over the whole list, but notice that Roman Catholics stress God the Father or God the Creator, Anglo-Catholics, Lutherans, and Presbyterians stress God the son, and Pentecostals emphasize the Holy Spirit. We Baptists tend to be what I call Jesusians. We talk far more about Jesus than we do about God the Creator or God the Holy Spirit.

Here's a little Baptist testimony. Growing up in a conservative Baptist Church I was taught that Roman Catholics were bad. For one thing, I was told they worshipped Mary. They worshipped a human being rather than only God. Also damnable was that they drank alcohol, and that Catholics would confess a sin and go out and do it again the next day, and they did all that weird stuff with candles. Once I saw on TV a priest taking some religious gizmo down an aisle and smoke was coming out of it. I had never seen that happen in a Baptist church. Catholics were just plain weird and plain wrong.

Here's my point. Christians and Churches are reactionary. We bend over backwards not be like other Christians and denominations and in doing so we miss out on, we miss out on the truth that other denominations have recognized. Here's my point. When you emphasize one aspect of the Trinity and neglect the other two parts what you end up with is a greatly reduced understanding of God.

Now this is not to say that one truth is as good as another truth. This is not to say that everything is truth. But it is to acknowledge that no one, no one, including us, has all the truth. And part of what it means to be church, and to be Christian, is to increase one's grasp of truth, truth about God, truth about the world, truth about the church, truth about ourselves.

Reductionism. Part of the problem is that, as the Apostle Paul said, we see in a mirror dimly. We, while on this earth, will never be able fully to grasp, understand God. We see in a mirror dimly, but also part of the problem is we have settled down in one part of the Trinity and missed out on the more about God that we can know.

What is true about God is also true of our reading and preaching of the Bible. I always chuckle when I hear someone claim that they believe the whole Bible. For one thing, it's impossible to believe the whole Bible when the Bible itself often holds in tension opposing viewpoints. But I also chuckle because I wonder if they have read all the Bible and realize all that is in it. There are many parts of the Bible that never quite pan out as sermon material. And those who determine texts for devotional guides or for the lectionary conveniently, conveniently skip over, water down difficult, problematic passages.

I'll give you two examples. The first is our last scripture lesson, Exodus 4. Did you hear what God was trying to do to Moses? Kill him. Do him in. End his life.

God has just called Moses to be the great liberator. Moses has been hesitant. Not sure he could make any big speeches. God and Moses negotiate. Moses caves in. Mo tells his pappy-in-law he's heading to Egypt. God next tells Mo, "Oh, by the way, I'm going to harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will not do what I'm sending you to tell him to do."

Doesn't make sense, does it?

What is even more confusing is the next verse, "At a lodging place on the way the Lord met him and sought to kill him." God the murderer. God the I'll ask you to help me one day God and the next day I'll stab you in the back God.

Now in the next verse Zipporah, Moses' wife, performs a circumcision on him and we are told "he" let him alone. Nowhere, nowhere in the previous instructions is Moses told he needed to be circumcised. And yet, and yet God tries to kill him. And the text is not clear why. It's like an editor has come behind and inserted the circumcision story to explain away the strange behavior of God, although the text doesn't even make that clear.

Either way, we haven't heard too many sermons on God trying to kill Moses, have we? I don't think that text has ever made it into the lectionary.

There are many, many examples of reductionism when it comes to the Bible, but here's a second one, Jeremiah 20. Jeremiah says that God has deceived him. It is, as Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, has pointed out, "an extraordinary term to use with reference to Yahweh." Actually, though, the best translation is not "deceived", although that still would give us an awkward text to preach on since Jeremiah would be saying God is dishonest. The term, however, is more disturbing. Elsewhere the word characteristically has sexual overtones. It is used directly to refer to manipulative or violent sexual exploitation wherein the proposed sexual partner is either taken by deception or is forcibly seized. Thus, Brueggeman points out, in this text we are in a world of sexual abuse and violence, so that the term allows for the nuance of rape. Mark this. Jeremiah says, "God, you have raped me."

Has anyone very heard a sermon on that concept?

Reductionism.

Now I'm not saying every Bible verse is as good as the next one. I'm as selective as the next person. The Bible itself forces us to be selective. But---when we put our heads into the sand with respect to troubling passages we may have a greatly reduced understanding of God or a greatly reduced take on how others have experienced God.

Reductionism. A greatly reduced theology. A greatly reduced reading of the Bible. Let's now turn to our practice of the Lord's Table.

Ken O'Connell likes to kid me about how we have never done the Lord's Supper the same way twice since he has been at Wedgewood. I haven't figured out whether Ken means it as a compliment or a complaint. I take it as a compliment.

The reason we practice the Lord's Supper so many ways is not because my creativity is gone off the deep end. I am energized by the creativity of people and I celebrate my own creativity, but it has nothing to do with creativity or let's see how many different ways we can do it. No, what it has to do with is the multiple meanings of the table, the depth of the Lord's table, its richness.

Back to that conservative church I grew up in. We only had communion four times a year and every time it was a memorial. We stressed the salvific, atoning death of Jesus. Jesus died for us. Yes, he did. But that is not the sum total of Jesus or the table. Some people call the practice the Eucharist which means "thanksgiving." Now that's one theme of the table. Recall that Jesus also spoke of the banquet feast. Remember that Jesus taught us to pray for daily bread. Don't forget that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Think about how those who ate with Jesus would have not liked each other. Paul Jewett, therefore calls the Last Supper the "Feast of Enemies." The Apostle Paul preaches about the importance of confession before coming to the table, getting our relationships right. Consider that we sometimes call it communion. Shouldn't we therefore have communion with each other as we come to the table and not be so individualistic? Jesus, according to John's gospel, prayed that "they may be one." At some point the theme of unity needs to be stressed. Do you see how many meanings there are? Do you see what gets missed when we become fixated on one meaning to the neglect of others?

Performing the Lord's Supper ritual exactly the same way every time leads to a reduced practice of the ritual, which in turn leads to reduced discipleship, reduced church, reduced theology, a reduced God.

To those who protest that repetition is necessary for ritual to be ritual, I hear that objection. What I have said, however, does not preclude continuity and repetition. At every Lord's Supper, or at least at 99% of the Lord's Supper, you know we are going to eat the bread and drink the cup. If you need stability, and I would describe myself as someone who needs stability, if you need stability and repetition and continuity, there it is. And don't forget, part of the stability comes from being in the faith community, not from putting some practice or a ritual in concrete.

The same goes for worship style. Certain things are going to happen at Wedgewood 99% of the time, always want to leave myself an out so I don't say 100%. Certain things are going to happen at Wedgewood regardless of worship style. Some of us at Wedgewood like more formal worship, more silence and less talking and fellowship. Other's like informality. Still others like a mixture. But regardless of the style, we are going to sing, we are going to share prayer concerns and celebrations, we are going to pray, we are going to take up an offering, we are going to hear and read the Bible or see it dramatically performed, and there is going to be a sermon. When you go to church, in one sense you know what to expect. In another sense, at Wedgewood you don't know what to expect, because every theme, every text does not merit being presented the same way. I don't sit down at the first of the week and say, "Well, let's see what creative thing we can do in worship. Let's see what I can do to confuse them, agitate them." What fool would intentionally confuse or agitate Baptists? No, I look at the text. I think about the theme. And the

liturgy is developed. But the idea is not to entertain you. The idea is how can we practice worship so that we can be the church and the people God wants us to be.

Reductionism. A final thought, a thought about the topic we have been considering for the last few Sundays, our practice of space, our arrangement of space. Here's the thought. When we arrange our space the same way every Sunday the risks of reductionism are increased.

I agree with Tom Driver of Union Theological Seminary in New York City. The arrangement and decoration of sanctuary space ought to arouse expectation by suggesting either a pronounced emptiness waiting to be filled, or the presence of careful planning for a particular occasion.

Too often a church's space is the same Sunday after Sunday. The sameness of church space lulls us into being a people who do not expect God to do anything new with the faith community.

Of course, we may just be happy with the way we are. We don't need any change in our worship because we don't need to change. And besides, everyone knows worship is not going to change anyone. Everyone knows we leave the church the way we entered it.

Or do we?

Walter Brueggeman says that when we put money in the offering plate we are financing a revolution against ourselves. I like to broaden that statement. When we enter a sanctuary, when we practice worship, if that worship is not so greatly reduced, chances are greater that we will not leave as we entered.

Some people call that transformation. Others speak of salvation. Still others use words like repentance. Are you interested in any of that? Are you willing to risk it? Or, do you want to settle for the comforts of a greatly reduced faith?