

Confession 8 July 2018

Confession is good for the soul.

I grew up in Texarkana, Arkansas.

There is, of course, a Texarkana, Texas. And as a matter of fact it is a larger town than Texarkana, Arkansas. Its schools are larger, bigger. Its high school is larger, bigger. Its football team is larger, bigger.

You probably know where this is going. There is also, of course, an intense football rivalry between the two high schools. And this, of course, seeped into everything else that happened in town including the Optimist Club Oratory Contest. Texas had won it every year for as long as anyone could remember. So the year I was in Jefferson Avenue Junior High Mrs. Johnson used this sorrowful fact to recruit a few of us Arkansas boys to enter the city wide oratory contest. This would be a way - even if our football team could not - to put it to those Texans!

Of course I volunteered. I was not athletic – pretty skinny as a matter of fact – so here was an opportunity for me to excel in something – so I invited my mom and dad to the contest.

All you had to do was memorize this two page mimeographed speech written by someone on American patriotism and then deliver it. So what could go wrong?

“... stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you! And when He spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet...He said to me, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me...they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day, The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God.” Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”

We know very little about Ezekiel. What we do know is that he lived through pretty rough times including the removal of a major part of the Jewish people to Babylon (586 B.C.) It was a time of hard lessons when the Jewish people learned that their God was more than – or less than - a tribal good luck charm who assured them victory in battle – sort of a “prosperity gospel” for ancient times. But in a violent world with empires and armies on the move and war and mayhem their God was One who was with them, walked with them, even in the bad times, the challenging times.

And I think if we really listen to this story there are some things that it says about our God, and about those He asks to minister for Him and to us.

I think it shows that God takes an ongoing, active interest in what is going on.

And I think it shows that God chooses some to serve Him in special ways. I think Ezekiel was one of those He chose. And I think God’s communication varies according to the one He has so chosen. I don’t know exactly how He does it – probably “God, laid it on my heart...” – but those words are about as close as we can get. In this particular reading this morning He sounds just like a Drill Sergeant I once had in Basic Training. But I suspect someone called to the ministry, someone called to the priesthood, feels as compelled as if my drill sergeant had yelled in his ear, “get your rear end moving, NOW!” except when one has heard God’s insistent call, that one cannot rest until one answers it, whatever that entails, whatever that costs.

Further I think this story shows that God has our number. Oh, he has our number. We come to church, we act so nice. If truth be known, and God is in the truth business, "impudent, stubborn, rebellious," are just the getting started words God could use to describe us.

And then we hear Paul's story from Second Corinthians. To say the least it invites a lot of questions such as what in the world is going on? And who is Paul talking about?

The one Paul is speaking of – "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up in the third heaven" – of course, Paul knows. It is Paul, himself.

And then he shares his wonderful experience with God.

But then what follows is intriguing as well.

Paul was saying this experience was so wonderful, so blessed, and I was so unworthy of it, "Therefore, to keep me from being so elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me..." Whatever in the world is this all about? We don't know.

Maybe what is important is that he had such a thorn, such a torment. That this one singled out by God to be the apostles to the Gentiles, the one who bought this new faith, this new way of living, this Kingdom of God, had a problem, had a serious defect. Yet God still chose him. Maybe he got short-tempered and lost his temper with associates, Maybe he procrastinated on things. How on God's green earth are we expected to work with such a one?

Well, God chose him.

"On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard Him were astounded. ..."What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter...?"And they took offense at him.

"What deeds of power are being done by His hands!"

The one who is speaking that is "offended" is not questioning the wonderfulness of the "deeds of power" – only that it is being done by a Carpenter of all people? A carpenter? Why not? What's wrong with that? We are visited by the very Son of God – and He working miracles and curing the sick and we are offended that this very Son is in the form of an ordinary Carpenter?

Maybe that's the point – God created us, ordinary people, just ordinary people – yet ordinary as we are – we are the ones who God looks to bring about the Kingdom of God – us, just us.

Its just us – ordinary us – who are helping homeless families with more than words but an active program housing homeless families during the year, or providing clothing, or shoes, or water to those who need it, who provide programs of music and joy for the community at no charge, and whose worship services incorporate joyful music and liturgy that the very angels of Heaven play hooky to slip off and enjoy.

Some of those listening to this message this morning – and who have been very patient to this point – are probably saying to themselves: "ok, ok, so we need to be nice and understanding with each other – we all can be jerks some of the time – that's just part of being human – what happened in the speech contest in Texarkana?"

I stood up to deliver my memorized speech on Patriotism. I did very well with the first two paragraphs if I may say so myself.

On the third paragraph my mind went blank. Blank, as in nothing, not a word could I remember. I just stood there staring at the audience including my mother and father. And they stared back at me. This was the first time they had come to see something I was doing in school.

I finally remembered the very last paragraph, recited it, and sat down.

It was – again – a clean sweep for the Texas team that year. Going home in the car with my parents there was very little conversation.

We are in difficult times in this country. I don't have to tell you about the partisanship, the ill-will, and lack of civility. We are also in difficult times for the church.

And all we have to fight this fight is us, just us, warts and all. And really all we have to fight it with is God's love. Do we truly have God's love in our hearts? Do we truly love each other, even when we disagree with each other, even when we don't understand each other? If we truly have God's love in our heart we will see God in those around us even in those with whom we disagree the most.

The good news is that God loves us and has always loved us – He looks to us, human, flawed, to continue to build His Church, His Kingdom of God.

And if we truly arm our hearts with His love, we will.

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy Holy Name, through Christ our Lord, Amen!

Richard Robertson