

Luke 4:20-30

Sixth Sunday Morning After The Epiphany, February 15, 2004

Rosemary Brown and Richard Walker. Both are household names throughout the South. Well, maybe not – even though both have been in the news lately. Rosemary and Richard are preacher types. In fact they are pastors. Richard, a Baptist, pastors over in Power Springs and Rosemary, a United Methodist, pastors up in Middle Tennessee, close to Nashville. Each delivered some rather unnerving words recently in the most unlikely places: their respective state legislatures.

Here's Pastor Richard's story. Seems a few weeks ago he was the "Preacher of the Day" for the Georgia House – usually a Protestant whom a legislator has invited from his or her home district, a tradition that goes all the way back to 1861. From what I understand, all this person is supposed to do is offer the opening prayer for that particular day.

Now I've been to the state capital twice, since being in Georgia these three plus years with an incredible guide: Dumah Walker. I survived, too! Had my picture made with House Speaker Tom Murphy two years ago. He lost his bid for reelection. I hope it wasn't because he had his picture made with me – maybe it was Dumah. Got into the Governor's office last year, with the help of our beloved State Representative Mark Butler. Got an 8 x 10 of Dumah, Mark, Bruce Minett, Governor Perdue, and me. I'm standing next to the Governor, by the way.

I've been fascinated each time I've gone. A couple of years ago, when I first went, Dumah and I just happened to get there in time for the opening prayer in the house chamber. It wasn't very reverent. I felt sorry for the preacher as he stood to call upon the name of the Lord to bless those leaders. I confess that I was intrigued with what was about to happen, so I bowed my head slightly, but kept my eyes opened, carefully looking around down on the floor. Some did bow their heads. Other read their newspapers. Still others, whispered to each other. Some even got up and walked out with aides. There wasn't any quiet that morning.

Now that really is religious freedom at its best – a component that most Baptists vigorously champion or they are supposed to champion. Nobody should ever be forced to listen to or participate in a prayer meeting or anything religious no matter where it is held. It should always be voluntary. Never coerced. I really wish, however, those guys and gals, elected officials that they are, who really aren't interested in "the opening prayer," wouldn't come in until after the preacher has had his or her say.

To be perfectly honest with you, I sort of hope I'm never asked to be the Preacher of the Day and offer the opening prayer for either the House or the Senate, since my observation here in Georgia, as well as Tennessee and Kentucky and Washington, DC, is that it's more perfunctory than it is thoughtful. More often than not, it doesn't mean anything.

Don't misunderstand me: I'm not against prayer in public places. I'm against it being merely a performance where it means nothing, just part and parcel of the doings at a particular event whether it's a football game, county water board meeting, the halls of congress, or a Deacons' meeting in a Baptist church. If invited and I were to accept, I would probably end up like Pastor Richard and Pastor Rosemary – praying my heart or preaching my heart, which can be unnerving at times.

Pastor Richard told the lawmakers they needed to seek guidance from God in all their decisions – especially that which constitutes marriage. Some were offended and thought his words were unnerving – so much so that House Speaker Terry Coleman intends to warn guest preachers not to address issues pending before the Georgia House.¹ My personal response: "Don't call me Mr. Speaker!" I doubt Pastor Richard will be invited back.

The same may be true for Pastor Rosemary up in Nashville. Here's her story. Lawmakers stood for this beloved woman of God to offer a "quick invocation" recently. She told them to sit down – preaching woman that she is. Reminded me of Deborah, one of the great judges of Israel, who was

convinced that the Lord would use her and thus deliver a certain “bad guy”, Sisera, into her hand, *“the hand of a woman”* the scripture says in Judges 4:9. Her story is told in Judges 4 and 5.

Pastor Rosemary, in the spirit of Deborah, wasn’t perfunctory. She refused the quickie. She preached a powerful and prophetic sermon on doing the right thing and I’m told that it was unnerving. Her cause wasn’t marriage. It was care for the elderly – especially in Tennessee’s nursing homes. Last September, two Middle Tennessee nursing homes caught fire and many residents died. Pastor Rosemary was one of the first on the scene at one of those nursing homes, since some of her parishioners were residents. It is believed that many could have survived had these nursing homes had sprinkler systems, but they didn’t because they were built prior to 1994 and had been “grandfathered in” under the state’s fire law. Don’t you just love the grandfather clause? In some situations it is appropriate. In others it’s not. Listen to how this brave pastor concluded her sermon:

“We are warehousing our elderly. We put them in waiting rooms and they wait to die. May God have mercy on us if we don’t protect them so they can choose to die of old age and natural causes. Let us pray.”²

Many lawmakers in the Volunteer State were unnerved. Like Pastor Richard, she’ll probably not be invited back to Rocky Top’s capital. I wonder why? Realizing I know neither, it seems to me that both tend to be more interested in truth than in performance. That is what opening prayers before legislative bodies, whether the United States Senate or a local school board meeting, can often be. Both pastors believe in matters that are biblical in nature. Both are passionate about the Bible in their own rights and traditions. And both seem to stand in the tradition of Jesus whose words could be unnerving.

Now if you don’t believe Jesus’ words can be unnerving, then consider, again, the New Testament text I read from Luke 4:20-30. The people in church that day, or more precisely, synagogue, were so unnerved by Jesus audaciously reminding them that two Hebrew ancestors, who stood in the great prophetic tradition of Israel, Elijah and Elisha, ministered to a couple of non-Israelites. And to beat all, the person to whom Elijah ministered was a Gentile woman and the person to whom Elisha ministered was not only Gentile, he was also a leper! Both were taboo in the Hebrew mindset. How dare Jesus.

So unnerved they were that a committee of the whole was quickly formed to throw Jesus out of the synagogue and it did. They were so enraged that they also sought to throw Him off a cliff just outside town, thus killing Him and eliminating anymore of this kind of sermonizing. The message would have been clear to all: “You preach like that and this is what will happen to you: you’ll be pushed over the cliff. We did it to one of our own “preacher boys” named Jesus. We’ll do it to you too.” So much for preaching the Bible, utilizing the principle of a “free pulpit” where there is “a free pew.” I doubt Jesus was ever invited back to First Synagogue of Nazareth in his hometown to deliver the “opening prayer” and serve as “Rabbi of the Day.”

Why are the words of Jesus so unnerving? Because they are offensive and undivided. Those people to whom He preached that Sabbath were downright offended by His declaration of fulfillment and His inclusion of the unwanted. Jesus offended to the point of exclusion. I have to tell you that this is where I take issue with Pastor Richard.

I do believe the truth of God’s love is to be preached and lived in love. To do that, though, without offending or excluding somebody isn’t always easy. Pastor Richard said he didn’t mean to “offend or exclude anybody.” Yet the Gospel, the Good News of the world’s only Living Savior, is offensive and exclusive. It is offensive in that it challenges everybody’s conventional ways of thinking and doing. It is exclusive in that it is for anybody and everybody. Now that sounds like a contradiction, even confusing. Yet the scriptures are extremely clear.

The Gospel is exclusively for anybody and everybody – Republicans and Democrats, homosexuals and heterosexuals, liberals and conservatives, males and females, Tennesseans and Georgians, Americans and Internationals, the rich and the poor, the old and the young, the haves and the

have-nots, you and me, and people who are so unlike us. That Gospel is exclusively for all people so all people – Republicans and Democrats, homosexuals and heterosexuals, liberals and conservatives, males and females, Tennesseans and Georgians, Americans and Internationals, the rich and the poor, the old and the young, the haves and the have-nots, you and me, and people who are so unlike us, can have the opportunity to begin to change and experience fulfillment. And when anybody is seized by this reality, he or she will find true fulfillment in making every attempt to do that which is right and the truth of verse 21 in this text will be apparent: *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* Offensive? Exclusive? Undivided? You better believe it.

If we’ll allow the words of Jesus to unnerve us and if we’ll act on that unnerving, by taking the scriptures seriously and allowing them to mold us and shape us, we’ll never stop trying to do that which is right. So it is right for us to celebrate with our students today as they bring to culmination a weekend of intense missions and discipleship that will impact them, hopefully, for the rest of their lives. So it is right that we offer ourselves on Compassion Day this Saturday. So it is right that we give ourselves to *The Purpose Driven Life* during the church’s *Undivided Hearts: Forty Days of Purpose* during the Season of Lent, beginning Ash Wednesday, February 25 and continuing through Palm Sunday, April 4. So it is right that the words of Jesus unnerve us to the point of confession of sin.

Very few of us, though, are willing to allow the words of Jesus to unnerve us. But that day in Nazareth they did. And that day in Atlanta they did through Pastor Richard. And that day in Nashville they did through Pastor Rosemary. And today and everyday they can, right here in Carrollton, if we’ll let them and the result will be our empowerment to take a stand, even if it’s not politically or culturally or, dare I say, religiously correct.

This coming Thursday-Sunday, “To Kill A Mockingbird” will be presented at the Carrollton Cultural Arts Center by Encore Theatre. If you come on Friday night, I may well be the one to take your ticket or usher you to your seat, since I’m going to be an usher at that performance. It’s one of the finest books I ever read, movies and plays I’ve ever seen. Harper Lee’s novel about racial tensions in the South during the Great Depression, in a small Alabama town in 1935, focuses on “doing right,” to borrow Pastor Rosemary’s line. Atticus Finch defends Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman, first from a lynch mob and then from a biased all white jury, risking his own reputation and even the lives of his children in the process. Can you imagine how unnerving? To the unnerved people in the community, he was a “bad guy.” He was willing to assume that role in spite of the danger, because he knew, and they did too – even if they didn’t admit it – that he was no “bad guy.”

Jesus was willing to risk the role of “bad guy” because He knew He really wasn’t. As a result, His soul was unnerved, just like Atticus Finch’s was. That first brush with death there in Nazareth was only a haunting reminder that, far worse than not being invited back, He eventually would die for those people who “threw Him out” because of His unnerving words that day when He was the “Preacher of the Day.” He assumed the role of one considered to be the “bad guy.” Laying down His life for all, He became the channel through which all might be saved – especially those unnerved by His words. He did that which was right through His teachings, His life, His death, and His Resurrection. I’m glad He did.

So let us not be afraid to be unnerved by the unnerving words of Jesus. To tell you the truth, I’m afraid of not being unnerved. What about you?

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
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All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version, 1989

¹ Carlos Campos, “Preachers Mustn’t Preach” [The Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#), Saturday, February 7, 2004.

² Jan Turrentine, “Will the Real Leader Please Stand?” [Ethicsdaily.com](#), Friday, February 6, 2004.