

PIG PODS AND i-PODS AND PRODIGAL SONS

I am a big fan of National Public Radio. I have it on in the car all the time, and am delighted when a long drive happens to coincide with broadcasts like “All Things Considered,” “Prairie Home Companion” or “Car Talk.”

One of my favorite programs is “This American Life” with Ira Glass. It’s a quirky collection of true stories about everyday folks making their way along the journey. It is broadcast, though, at a time I can’t listen, so I download the podcast version of the show, and listen to it on my iPod when I take my morning walk.

Two weeks ago the show was called “Kid’s Logic.” It was all about how children think. Some of it was very funny, but some of it was quite poignant.

One of the stories was told by the father of a four-year old girl.

It seems that as the holiday season drew near she asked her parents why we celebrate Christmas. “What does it mean?” she asked her Dad.

Her father explained that it’s the day we celebrate Jesus’ birthday. Then he went out and bought a children’s Bible. Over the next few weeks he read to her, and told her all about the birth in Bethlehem, and how Jesus made sick people well, and taught them to love each other.

“Jesus said ‘Do unto others as we would have them do unto us,’” he told his daughter, and then he explained just what that meant.

Shortly after that, as they were out for a drive, they went by a big church with a crucifix on its front lawn.

Pointing to the figure on the cross, the little girl asked, “Who’s that?”

Suddenly, the father realized he had failed to tell her how the story of Jesus ended.

Heaving a sigh, he told her, “That’s Jesus.”

“Who did that to him,” she asked, “And why?”

Patently, in language he hoped she could understand, he explained that some of the authorities thought Jesus message about loving and forgiving and caring for all people, even the outcasts, was just too radical—too dangerous.

Christmas came and went, and the cold days of January finally rolled around. The little girl's pre-school was closed for Martin Luther King Day, and so the father decided to take the day off, and spend it with his daughter. They played games, and read, and at lunch time, they went to McDonald's.

As they sat down at their table, the little girl spotted a newspaper section that someone had left behind. On the front of it was a very large drawing of Dr. King.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"He's Martin Luther King," explained her Dad, "today is his birthday. That's why you're not in school.

"What was he?"

"A preacher," said her father.

Her eyes lit up. "For Jesus?"

"Yeah," replied her Dad, "actually he was. And he was also famous for something else."

He stumbled a bit trying to figure out how to explain civil rights to a four year old.

Finally, he said, "Dr. King said that you should treat everybody the same, no matter what they looked like."

"Well," said his daughter, "that's what Jesus said!"

"Yeah," said her dad, "I guess it is."

The little girl thought about it a minute, and then, looking at her dad with inquisitive eyes, she asked, "Did they kill him too?"

Sometimes in the safety and comfort of our suburban lives, we forget that being a Christian can be dangerous. Sometimes we forget speaking the truth can be risky at best, and as with Dr. King, even lethal.

Much of the year we think of Jesus as a kind and gentle soul. We love the stories of his birth, and revel in the thought of his being wrapped in swaddling clothes and nursed by his mother. We are drawn to the accounts of his loving interactions with children, and the stories of his healing the sick.

But then along comes Lent and with it a barrage of reminders that he didn't just deal with life's concerns on a pastoral level. He didn't just handle the problems of life in private

counseling sessions and religious ceremonies with his followers. In Lent, we are reminded that Jesus took on the great powers of his day and spoke out against injustice and inequity. He came to the defense of the despised, the lowly and the outcast. He spoke up on behalf of the immoral prostitutes, the traitorous tax collectors and the hated foreigners. He declared over and over again, that they too are loved by God. That they too must be treated as we ourselves would want to be treated. He constantly reminded his listeners that we are to love even our enemies.

Jesus wasn't afraid to confront the authorities in a direct and straightforward manner. The most famous example of that of course was the time he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple who were ripping off the poor and making the Temple authorities rich.

But he was often more subtle, sometimes using stories to make his point.

Sometimes those stories were unambiguous, like the story of the Good Samaritan, wherein Jesus clearly paints the despised foreigner as the hero, and the elite of his society as those in the wrong.

More often, though, his stories were told in such a way as to leave open to the listener the matter of interpretation. What did he really mean when he spoke of a sower sowing his seed? Who was the sower supposed to represent? How about the tale of the laborers in the vineyard? Did he mean us?

This parable from Luke falls into the second category. He tells it to the scribes and Pharisees who were grumbling about his consorting with sinners. Ostensibly it is about a deeply troubled family, and a father's indulgent love, but maybe in context it has another meaning as well. Perhaps it is meant to challenge their exclusionary and oppressive practices.

Maybe Jesus wants the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day, to see themselves in the angry older brother. Maybe he wants them to recognize the Prodigal Son as symbolic of the very ones they would exclude: the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the foreigners and the diseased. Maybe he wants them to understand that it isn't just the lowly ones who need to repent. For their smug pride, he seems to be saying, is as offensive to God as the more blatant wrongdoings of the others. Maybe in the end, he wants them to realize that it is all about grace; that like the father in the story, God loves and welcomes us all. As author Philip Yancey writes: ". . . there is nothing we can do to make God love us more . . . and. . . there is nothing we can do to make God love us less." (*What's So Amazing about Grace?*, 70) Unfair as that may seem, that is the way of grace.

Again and again Jesus has the courage to speak this truth, to offer up this unpopular word, to point out this fundamental reality.

And you and I are called to do the same.

Go see the movie *Amazing Grace*, if you want an historic example. See for your self how William Wilberforce spent his entire career bucking extremely powerful forces in order to lead Great Britain to the point of abolishing the slave trade. Go and see how he was harassed and hassled, how he was reviled and ridiculed, how he paid with his own health, all for speaking the truth.

Go and see how his mentor John Newton, courageously left behind his work as a slave ship captain in order to bear witness to the truth of God's love for all. Hear how Newton was haunted by what he called 20,000 ghosts—the voices of those women, men and children he had transported across the Atlantic so that they might be sold into servitude. And how he joined Wilberforce and others in declaring that God's amazing grace is available to all, not just the well to do, the powerful, and the highly placed.

Yes, speaking up can be risky. And while I'm no Jesus, or Dr. King or Wilberforce or Newton, I have tasted a bit of it myself.

Back in the mid-eighties, I was the founding president of a hospice in upstate New York. It was a time of great concern about the AIDS epidemic. At our hospice annual fundraising dinner I spoke about the disease, and how so many gay men were being told that it was God's punishment for their being homosexual. No one, I said, was being punished. No one deserves AIDS. A couple in the back of the dining room started to heckle me. Loudly denouncing all that I was saying, and questioning how I could call myself a Christian, and then walked out. We never saw them again. And they never sent us another check.

Following the shooting of a young black man who was unarmed and innocent, I preached a sermon in my prior parish, about the dangers of stereotyping and the deep seated prejudice that often motivated racial profiling on the part of law enforcement officials.

One member of the church was furious with me—how could I say such a thing about the police? They need our full and unqualified support, I was told. He stopped coming to church—and despite my attempts to talk it over, refused to approach the issue again.

When the tortures perpetrated at Abu-Gharib surfaced, I said in a sermon that even our enemies were loved by God—and that abusing them was wrong. I even suggested writing to the President or our leaders in Congress to register one's dismay. It was not my popular sermon of all time. It got back to me that some thought I was too political. One individual even berated me in a very public place, saying that I had no right to speak out about such things when our nation was at war. It was, I was told, unpatriotic.

Speaking up, speaking out, can be, and often is, a risky proposition. Perhaps, in part, that is why it took us so long to vote to become Open and Affirming.

But speaking up is our calling. And as a preacher of the gospel, it is *my* calling to provide you an example.

Sometimes I do.

And sometimes I don't.

Sometimes the cost just seems too great to bear, and I side step opportunities to speak the truth.

And that, sisters and brothers, is my Lenten confession. Sometimes I don't have the courage of my convictions and I fail to exercise the call I have been given by God.

But like the father in the story, God has welcomes me home. God assures me that for all those times I have been, in Newton's word, "a wretch", I am still covered by that amazing grace. And whether I speak up or not, I am loved. And in that grace, in that love, I can find the courage to speak out. I will not always be right and people will not always agree with what I say. It is important that we are in dialogue, recognizing that in some situations there may be more than one right answer. But, guided by scripture, tradition, my own experience and the Holy Spirit, I will have spoken the truth as I understand it.

And so can you. And together we who celebrate 175 years of history as the Saugatuck Congregational Church, we who are an open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ, we can be a force for justice, mercy, peace and love.

And that is what amazing grace is all about!

**Amen
--John H. Danner**