

The 11th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 14, August 9, 2015. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Some of you know that I spent many years as a bi-vocational priest before finding myself in a parish full-time – I worked as a manager in the travel industry. One of the great travel industry perks is what’s called a Fam Trips – short for “Familiarization Trip.” They’re absolutely essential for travel professionals – without that first-hand experience how could any professional worth their salt be able to talk intelligently about destinations – Just watch Rick Steves (a self-described “Good Lutheran Boy!”) and you’ll get the idea – his expertise and his knowledge that led to his shows developed out of Fam Trips. Over my time I went to many wonderful places on several continents. It was work – very pleasurable work, but work. And each trip was cheap – very cheap! I remember two in particular, both in the ‘80’s:

- 7 days in Bavaria traveling down the *Romantische strasse* - it included airfare, all accommodations, meals, entry fees etc. for the princely sum of \$25! (Wait! Today that would be \$56, so not quite so “cheap!” And,
- 7 days in Greece – again all inclusive for \$10. Today that would be \$23.

Yes, that was a great perk!

One night on the Greek trip we were taken to a Taverna – it was obviously a place used by tour companies. It used long, picnic-like tables, and had a stage at one end. We were told this was going to be an authentic “Greek” meal, with live entertainment.

Also there was an actual tour group – not a bunch of what one person called “jaded travel professionals(!)” – from the UK. As the evening progressed their tour guide was walking up and down between the tables saying “Aren’t we having fun, eh!” (I suppose he could have been Canadian, eh?!).

Later, our group all agreed that the atmosphere was ersatz – fake – the musicians clearly bored out of their own skulls, the food bland, the wine – Retsina – like drinking pine tar (not, you understand that I actually know what pine tar tastes like! But you could tell from the smell...!)

The truth was that we were not - in that tour leader’s words – having fun!

But then, he had an agenda – discontented customers would not mean repeat business or bad reviews.

There’s a difference between being an interpreter or a guide, and being a salesperson. The goal of an interpreter or guide is to provide an understanding devoid of self-interest. A salesperson seeks to persuade, sometimes against the best interests of the customer.

The major problem I saw was that this tour guide’s words were inauthentic and manipulative – he was trying to get these tourists to think in a certain way, despite what they might be feeling or thinking at that moment. And – to be fair – some of them might indeed have been having fun (though I suspect they would have been the ones with low expectations, and a low threshold on the “fun” meter!)

All the travel professionals picked up on that inauthentic manipulation right away.

It’s my firm conviction that we human beings almost always recognize when we encounter something that’s not authentic, and likewise when we encounter something authentic. As John Stewart – late of the Daily Show – said on his last show this week: everyone has their own “Bull” meter (though that’s not quite all the words he used), and we need to get used to using them.

In my forty-four years as a preacher authenticity has been and continues to be a high value for me. So I have always been cautious about using some specific words when related to the

other half of the preaching equation: you. Mostly they're words that tell you what to do. Any time I'm tempted to pair words like "must" or "should" or "must not" or "should not" with the word "you" – or even the word "us" – I have to remind myself that my role is not to tell you what you should think or feel, but to offer guidance from my own wisdom, experience, and insight; to offer gateways that lead to a deeper engagement with God, with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit.

It's not for me to tell you whether to proceed through those gateways, or even what you will find on the other side; rather I understand my role as offering you help in preparing for that journey.

Another word I'm very cautious around is *belief*. What we mean by that word *belief* today is a meaning almost completely absent from the language about Jesus and our faith in the New Testament. What *is* there is the language of faith told in stories. The New Testament *doesn't* demand we accept as a factual report – as something that can be quantified, measured, assessed the way scientists do today – the New Testament *doesn't* demand we accept as a literal, factual report everything we find in its pages.

The New Testament *does* insist that there is a way of living that is transformative, that it involves putting our trust in the God we meet in Jesus, and following the example he – and those who have followed him – have set; and it strongly suggests it would be a very good thing for us – and for our world – if we actually do so.

The great 20th Century Swiss theologian Karl Barth – a man who, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others founded the "Confessing Church" in Germany in the face of Nazi oppression, whose writings were voluminous, and whose theology is still highly influential – was asked in 1962 (on his one visit to this country) how he would summarize the essence of the millions of words he had written. He broke into song (not quite as well as Bill Skubi did two weeks ago!): "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Relationship, experience, encounter, trust, faith – they're all words that lie behind that very simply proclamation of faith by Barth. Belief? Not so much!

All that I have said means that I am very careful not to use the language of belief in the post-Enlightenment scientific way it's meant today. When that word – belief – is used about our faith I always understand it to be describing the way we put our trust and faith in the God we meet in Jesus, rather than any literal/factual philosophical understanding of the word "belief." And, I will never tell you that you should or shouldn't live in a particular way to be a good Christian – rather (I hope!) you have heard and will hear me suggest that based on what is in our sacred texts our faith offers us specific ways of living that are healthy and others that are not, and the healthy ones involve trusting God in Jesus through the Holy Spirit and seeking to live those things in community with other like-minded people.

And I try to make sure I never propose for *you* anything that *I* find inauthentic about our faith. I try to leave those things up to other preachers and teachers, because not only would it be unethical for me to propose something I don't fully trust, I might be wrong. It's not for me to tell you what you should or shouldn't embrace – ultimately that's your choice *and* your responsibility.

At the center of it all – for me – is Jesus. Here are some things I do want to share that have to do with how I engage my New Testament faith and Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. The distinction I'm making isn't of my invention, but I find it compelling: it describes the 2nd person of the Trinity two different ways: The Jesus of History and the Christ of faith.

- The Jesus of history walked beside Sea of Galilee
- The Christ of faith comes to me, and, I hope, to you, across the sometimes troubled waters of my life, offering peace in the face of fear, uniting community in the face of anxious individualism.
- The Jesus of history walked the highways and byways of the Galilee and the Jerusalem regions offering solace, healing, and a vision of a transformed world.
- The Christ of faith walks beside me, and, I hope, you as we make our own journeys through life, offering us solace, healing, and a vision of a transformed world.
- ★ The Jesus of history challenged the worst excesses of Empire, including the Roman' belief in the Empire's Manifest Destiny
- ★ The Christ of faith challenges the worst excesses of Empire in this world today and in me, and, I hope, in you, including any sense of Manifest Destiny that makes claims about our nation, and any sense of Manifest Destiny within me, and, I think, within you, that seductively invites me to see myself as better, more important, more valued than anyone else.
- The Jesus of history proclaimed peace to all people he met, a peace that was the result (as Paul says) of the struggle for justice through non-violence that opposed empire's "religion" – it's imperial theology – that saw peace as the result of the struggle for victory through war;
- The Christ of Faith proclaims peace to me and (I hope!) to you, a peace predicated on my active commitment to the non-violent struggle for justice for the oppressed and the poor.

I hope you are getting something of the picture! We are, I believe, blessed – not cursed – with living in interesting times. The future is ours for the taking; it won't require belief (in the modern sense) about God and Jesus; it will require faith and trust in the God we meet in Jesus, and it will require, I'm convinced, that I/we convert that faith and trust into an active commitment to seek the transformation of the world for good. And that transformation has to begin with us.