

A BETTER WAY, a STRONGER YES -- Matthew 4:1-11
St Marks UMC, Charleston, WV Lenten Luncheon - February 25, 2015

Barry was a Christian. No one doubted that!

Barry was so angry with all the bad things he saw every day in the world. It seemed that not a day went by that he did not have to reprimand at least one person that he saw, or went to church with, or worked with.

There were people who did not honor their church membership vows. Barry scolded them for that

There were people who either practiced immorality, or who appeared to condone it, because they did not speak out against it — because they were too soft. Someone had to call them on their hypocrisy, and Barry was not too timid to be the one.

Barry understood that he was sometimes abrasive. But after all “right is right and wrong is wrong.” And if Jesus were to be his Lord and Savior, Barry didn’t need to worry about what people thought about him.

His purpose in life was to follow Jesus. What others thought of him was just not that important. What mattered to him was that he did not let down his Savior.

After all, it was Jesus who said, right there IN THE BIBLE: **“Whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven.”** (Matthew 10:33.)

Barry was a Christian. No one doubted that! In fact, Barry sometimes wished that he could be as sure of the same about his pastor. But, there were times when Barry himself was NOT so sure about the Reverend, who sometimes saw not BLACK AND WHITE but said that sometimes things were more GREY.

Susan was a Christian. Of that she was absolutely certain. If you asked people at her work if Susan is a Christian, most would say something along the lines of: “I don’t really know. We don’t talk about such things. But she is a nice person; I like her.”

Actually, Susan knew Barry. They both worked for the same state government agency. She was, one might say, the polar opposite of Barry — at least in terms of being a Christian. I mean — neither one was likely to steal, cheat on their income taxes, lie to a colleague at work, or commit adultery. But aside from the morality code, they were very, very different.

Barry’s religion was the one thing by which almost everybody identified him — and most disdainfully so.

Susan — no one really knew she practiced Christianity — she was just nice and non-officious. If someone practiced gross immorality, they wouldn’t think twice about doing it around Susan. Her Christianity was an entirely private matter — just her and Jesus. Period. Thank you very much.

But her religion made her feel good underneath. ***Jesus was like an expensive set of underwear — made you feel really good, but nobody needed to know about your wearing it.***

René also worked in the very same state government agency as did Barry and Susan. She was a product of the 1960’s — i.e. she believe that when Jesus said, “**Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,**” that it said that Jesus meant life ought to be different because of the Gospel — NOW! Not just pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye.

Earlier in life, René had been one of those social gospel do-gooders; willing to be arrested for the cause, etc., etc. Then René got married, had children, and began to see life in more than just black and white. She was less of a radical and more of a “responsible citizen.”

But she never lost her sense of the **“cosmic Christ”** and of the **Kingdom of Heaven**. When she tried to describe her “radical love of Jesus” and her “establishment middle class life style,” she sometimes simply said, **“I work in state government, for Christ’s sake.”** She meant it was a statement of her calling, although many of her tree hugger friends thought she was just swearing.

The turning point for René had been in the summer between her second and third years of law school, when she had — at her pastor’s suggestion — gone on retreat at a Center for Action and Contemplation, in New Mexico. There she learned from the balding Franciscan priest — whom she could not picture in her mind’s eye, even today, without humming the Paul Simon lyrics from “Me and Julio Down By The School Yard:”

“When the radical priest came to get our release, we was all on the cover of Newsweek.”

This priest was the one who had taught her the way of **spirituality based social action**. *The best form of Christian prophetic work is not in casting stones against sinful conduct, but in demonstrating a better way.”*

One day, at a continuing education event at work, Barry, Susan, and René were in attendance. It was unfortunate that **Joe — the head of their department** — was one of those people who made himself feel bigger and

better, by demeaning other people, trying to make them seem smaller and lesser. Neither Barry, Susan, nor René — nor, for that matter, any one else in their department — liked Joe. Some feared him. Some actively disliked him and talked about him behind his back. Very few, if any, ever openly opposed him, for none of them were in jobs protected by civil service.

In the meeting, Joe said something really derogatory about the staff. It was mean; it was hurtful. And one employee — who have been having a hard day / week / month — just snapped under the abuse. **Sam was his name.**

Sam could bear it no longer. He stood up and said before the shocked room: **“You S__ O__ B____! We just aren’t going to take any more of this G__ D_____ horse [excrement.]”**

No one was more shocked than the department head Joe, whose reputation for retribution was well known. The room got very, very quiet.

Finally Barry stood up. In a clear and strident voice, he spoke words that everyone heard: **“You, sir, took the Lord’s name in vain. And I, for one, hope that you pay the consequences for that. For don’t you know that ‘Whoever denies me before men, I will deny before my Father who is in heaven.’”**

The groan — which was almost, but not quite, silent — swept through the room, even catching Joe, the Boss in its grasp. Joe was anxious to punish the offending Sam, but Joe was also offended by the lugubrious self-righteousness of Barry.

Sue did nothing. She was embarrassed for everyone.

Meanwhile, **softly and quietly, René walked to the front of the room**, whispered quietly in the department head's ear, and then walked back into the room and put her arm around Sam's shoulders, while at the same time escorting him out of the room.

Later in that day, after the meeting, René sat down with each of Joe and Sam, and worked and worked in shuttle diplomacy until a solution was worked out which saved face and careers.

That night:

Sanctimonious Barry patted himself on the back that night in his prayers, unaware of just how much he made people dislike Jesus.

Quiet Sue prayed that night that God would be pleased by her quiet solitude above the fray.

And **René went home exhausted** by the day's labors. She prayed a prayer of thanks that God had empowered her to show Boss Joe and Frazzled Sam another alternative, with which they could both live. **This Kingdom work is hard; but, by God! it felt good to do.**

Matthew 4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written,

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple 6 and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you,'
and

“On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10 Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

“You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”

11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

In this scripture from Matthew, we heard Satan quoting scripture to tempt Jesus.

Temptation is – for all humans, including Jesus – very hard. **Oscar Wilde once said that he could withstand anything except temptation.**

The best way to say NO is to be in touch with a stronger YES.

It gave Jesus an alternative to simply telling Satan to GO, or go back, TO HELL! Instead Jesus had a BETTER WAY, a STRONGER YES.

Jesus desires that each of us also finds a BETTER WAY. And by God’s power, the Friendship of Jesus, and the comfort and direction of the Holy Spirit, so too it may be for each of us. Jesus showed us that possibility. Perhaps, that could be a Lenten Discipline for us – to be on the lookout for the **BETTER WAY**, for the **STRONGER YES**, in each temptation we face.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.