

## A Lenten Guest

There are people in this room who have heard me speak from a pulpit for more than 25 years, and for their sake I try very hard to keep sermons from being predictable, so I am inviting an invisible guest into the pulpit this morning as I begin a brief three-sermon series. We are in that season which the religious calendar calls Lent, a time many churches — though not all — set aside for sacrifice and self-examination. We have made something of a mockery out of Lent because we have taken the notion of sacrifice and turned it into a harmless cultural artifact. We “give up something” for Lent, but it’s usually little more than chocolate or caffeine or some annoying personal habit like being late or watching too much trash on daytime TV.

In other words, we think small, and therefore our sacrifices are small. But for those who are serious about celebrating it, Lent is supposed to be a time for taking a close look at ourselves, our families, our institutions, our whole way of life — and then asking, “Do these things please God? Are they in any meaningful way, Christian?” So for the next few weeks I plan to ask for some special help in the taking of this inward journey. Rather than try to do it alone, or ask that you do it alone, I will invite into our midst one of the most unusual and disturbing Christians ever to plant himself like a thorn in the side of the church. His name is Soren Kierkegaard, a 19th century Danish philosopher who loved God but who quarreled fitfully with organized Christianity until the day he died. To save time, I will mostly refer to him from now on as SK.

Although many of his ideas are challenging, his writing is often too obscure and difficult to be effective from a pulpit without some translation. Woody Allen expressed one day how most people feel about SK's writings. Woody was trying to convince an audience that he was not an snob . "I was never a high-culture person," he said. "I don't spend every night hovering over Kierkegaard or at the opera." I would guess that for most of us, the Danish philosopher is a great deal harder to follow than opera, but we get Woody's point: Kierkegaard is not easy. All the same, I can't help thinking it might have helped Woody if he *had* spent a little more time in the company of SK. I'm hoping, obviously, that sharing his ideas from this pulpit can be helpful to us.

One of SK's life-long concerns was the difference between *theory* and *practice*. He was annoyed with people who sat around talking endlessly about philosophies of religion without ever getting down to the brass tacks of how faith is implemented in homes and schools and offices. In his country, steeped in Christian history, he felt that people knew what Christianity is; what they needed was help in knowing how to be a Christian in a particular time and place. So he wrote 35 books about "how" to be a Christian, using that old rhetorical device known as comparison and contrast. In other words, one way to know what a Christian is, is to know what a Christian is not. And one thing SK insisted is that being a Christian is not, cannot be, boring.

Boredom, he says, is a great evil. One of his characters goes so far as to say that "boredom is the root of all evil" — a preview of death, if not death itself. I can imagine his looking at street gangs — no job, no life,

bored to death and saying to one another, “Let’s hijack a car, let’s do a driveby shooting” — and saying to us, “I tried to tell you 150 years ago how evil boredom is!” It’s his idea that since the word *gospel* means *good news*, a believer who is bored is a contradiction in terms. But let’s be honest: how many church-goers have we known who have simply accepted boredom as the cross they must bear in order to stick with organized religion? How many others go church-shopping to see if they can find a beating pulse somewhere?

I can’t vouch for the authenticity of this story, but according to a Lutheran pastor named Peter Unks, a paramedic being interviewed on the local TV talk show was asked, “What was your most unusual and challenging 911 call?” “Recently,” the paramedic said, “we got a call from that big white church at 12th and Walnut. A frantic usher was v ery concerned that during the sermon an elderly man passed out in a pew and appeared to be in real trouble. The usher could find no pulse, and there was no noticeable sign of life.” The interviewer wondered, “What was so unusual and demanding about this particular call?” “Well,” the paramedic said, “we carried out four other guys before we found the one the usher was concerned about.”

You all know what I’m talking about. You have sat in a church and been so bored that you have invented little games to help pass the time. I would like to think it doesn’t happen here every week, but one man who wasn’t in the habit of going to church and didn’t expect anything to happen when he visited this one, confessed to me that early on in our worship service he had counted all the light bulbs in the chandelier, and wanted me to know that one was not burning. Well, confessions are especially in order during Lent, so I’ll

make mine. I've sat in a few churches and hoped for, prayed for, even engineered a little relief from boredom. I once pretended a nosebleed and walked out with a handkerchief over my nose. My cousin Phyllis admitted pinching her baby during a particularly dull sermon and making it cry, so she would have to take it out.

Fred Craddock, that best of all teachers of preaching, says: "Be honest: have you ever quietly cheered when a child fell off a pew or a bird flew in the window or the lights went out or the organ wheezed or the sound system picked up police calls or a dog came down the aisle and curled up to sleep below the pulpit? Passengers on cruise ships, after nine beautiful sunsets and 86 invigorating games of shuffleboard, begin to ask the crew hopefully, 'Do you think we'll have a storm?'"

I once heard a quiet and gentle clergyman tell of attending the Indianapolis 500. He confessed that after two hours of watching the same cars speed by again and again, the boredom turned him into a degenerate sinner. At first, he said, he simply entertained thoughts of "what if—" and his own imagination thrilled him. But soon his boredom demanded more. A car caught fire, and he was suddenly excited again. Not until later did he remind himself that he had not felt nearly as much concern as he should have for the driver. But the burning car was not enough; something more dramatic was needed to resurrect him from the death of boredom. Voices within him, he admitted, began to call for a smashup. The demon of boredom had totally transformed him.

Shift the scene to some all-too-typical church. The people are bored and yearning for rescue from this kind of premature death, so they begin to do strange, dysfunctional things. They elevate the petty to the level of

the cosmic. They fight over things of no consequence. They split into factions and go to war over the color of the carpet or the latest gossip in the kitchen. People who want excuses for not going to church make fun of churchmembers who scrap like this, and call them hypocrites, but that's probably too harsh. They are probably just doing something out of sheer boredom to remind themselves that they are still alive.

But nobody in such a church gets mad at the minister, because he's too nice to be offensive. Frankly, that's not an adjective I really covet. (I can hear some of you thinking, "You don't have to worry!") It is absolutely impossible to preach the message of the gospel and not occasionally disturb or even offend someone. If Christian churches in Germany had not been so "nice" about the Nazi party in the 1930's the whole world might have been alerted sooner to the evil they represented. If you think Jesus was "nice" to people or philosophies that threatened his idea of a kingdom of heaven on earth, you and I are reading very different Bibles.

I am absolutely convinced that if you established Jesus of Nazareth in this pulpit he would call Fred Phelps by name and tell you that the vile and ugly signs he posts in front of churches and on college campuses are an insult to everything loving and decent in the Christian religion. I also believe that he would pull no punches in castigating militant fundamentalists in Iran or Egypt or Morocco — or America — who try to impose their wills on others by force or by guile. And guile works extremely well. What is called the Far Right in American religion has admitted cheerfully that its followers are infiltrating school boards by stealth all over

this country in order to impose their agenda on the rest of us. If we are too “nice” to say anything about it, we stand a good chance of waking up one day to discover that while we slept we lost some of cherished freedoms.

When Jesus preached his first sermon in his home synagogue in Nazareth, he first pleased his audience by reading their own scripture to them. Look at him....what a nice boy! And then he infuriated them by asking them to stop being narrowminded bigots and remember how wide God’s love is — and so they decided to chase him to the edge of a cliff and throw him over to his death. No boredom that day! And as the crowds got bigger, and questions from the authorities got tougher, Jesus said some things that set some people free and made other people furious. They grumbled, they muttered, they gnashed their teeth. They began, early on, to plot how they could get rid of him. So, what was his crime? He said God loved everybody, and we should too. Many people were angry when they heard that, but at least nobody was slowly dying of boredom.

Hatred is either terrible or good, depending on what arouses it and how it’s used. And it’s never boring, which is why so many people listen to hate radio. I tune in occasionally just to keep up with what part of my world is like, and I hear people so full of unreasonable hatred that they can hardly get their words out — fairly sputtering with intense emotion. If we are too nice to counter that daily eruption of verbal violence, we should’nt be surprised when the haters get things done — like bombing abortion clinics, mailing letter bombs, shooting a president, or blowing up the Murrah building in Oklahoma City. Apathy in the face of hate talk is one way of becoming an accessory to all those crimes.

Kierkegaard said we cannot be boring or apathetic and be Christian. When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” they did not respond, “Well, frankly, Lord, nobody cares.” What they did was to come up with the names of several non-boring people. “Some say you are John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets come back from the dead.” Notice, please, that no one imagined Jesus might be Methusaleh come back to life, whose only distinction is that he drew breath longer than anyone else before he died. Jesus, on the other hand, lived a painfully brief life which might have been extended considerably if he had just always been positive and nice in the things he said.....if, in other words, he had been a little more bored and boring.

It’s always a little risky to overhear some of the memories your children have of what they heard when they were growing up. I was amused to hear one of mine say this to an audience one day: “As a child, my father used to get angry when one of us would say that we were bored. ‘Don’t tell me you are bored!’ he would say sternly. ‘Tell me anything else — that you are hungry, confused, angry, anxious, distracted....anything....but don’t tell that you are bored!’ Well, needless to say, my brother and I, and my sister, learned not to use that word around my father.

“It used to startle me, this aversion he had to the idea of being bored. Now I understand it,” he said, and then went on to explain it so much better than I could have done when he was a child that it’s worth your hearing. “Boredom is a form of self-centeredness. It dismisses through a kind of arrogance and blindness the world of possibilities laid before us every moment of every single day. It operates on illusions about what is

exciting, and what should be brought to us on a plate, catered for our amusement.” And then he remembered that there was someone else in the house who wasn’t always nice, either. “‘The world owes you nothing,’ my mother used to say. ‘It isn’t here for your amusement. Go and make your own fun.’”

So, if you are wondering what to give up for Lent, how about boredom? Our invisible guest, SK, told a parable once about a man who was given the assignment of entertaining himself for an entire day, but was such a clever fellow that he was all finished by noon — with a long afternoon of boredom ahead. You have heard Socrates say that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” which means there is always something to do. You have heard it said that “money is the root of all evil,” but SK gives boredom that distinction. It is life slowly suffocating through lack of passion. He would remind us this morning that we will all die soon enough. No sense being finished by noon.

To be continued.

Help us remember, Eternal God, the word of Him who said to us, “I am come that you may have life, and not a little but a lot.” May we lay claim to that great gift. Amen.