

Reflections

One of the catchy things we like to do is name the age we are living in. We've had the Atomic Age, and during the 80's The Age of Greed, and now, in the 90's, what we keep hearing on all sides is that we are in the Information Age. It certainly seems to fit: more print and television information than any generation has ever known, plus the incredible explosion of computer-generated access to knowledge — Internet , E-mail , all those “dot-this dot-that” Web sites. It's all fascinating stuff, and I've been excited just to touch the hem of the garment, but one thing I would like to remind you of this morning is that the Information Age also brings along a great deal of Misinformation: conclusions that rest on very shaky evidence, deceptive headlines, articles that turn out to be not quite what the first two or three paragraphs led you to believe.

Case in point: once each week the Wichita Eagle prints a special section which is a kind of smorgasbord of what's going on in religion. Most of the time I look at it briefly and without passion, but two recent articles in the same section got under my skin — not because of the topics, but because of the way they were handled. One of them, headlined “Rediscovering Mary,” pointed out that while Catholic tradition has exalted the mother of Jesus above all other saints, with elaborate feasts and ceremonies, Protestants gave that up in the wake of the Reformation movement four centuries ago. Those statements are well-known facts of history. But now, the article would have us believe, Protestants are rediscovering Mary, a trend that may be sparked, the story says, by reports of miracles at certain shrines dedicated to her, as well as at unexpected places.

Actually, as you find out if you keep reading, there's not much of a trend at all. Some Protestants, like myself, are fascinated by the history of how Mary came to be adored, and the forms it took. We are glad to admit that the reverence paid to a woman and mother during the harsh Middle Ages was a softening and civilizing influence in that brutal world, but we put no stock in the endless stream of miracle stories about her sudden appearances in eastern Europe or South America — how a statue of her weeps real tears or a painting of her face shows a sudden smile ten minutes before sunset. The fact is that Protestants are about where they've always been on this issue: they love and respect their Catholic friends, but given their philosophy of religion are simply not able to understand the enormous enterprise based on adoration of the mother of Jesus. And despite the misleading headline for this story, there is no significant change in their attitude.

I once edited a daily newspaper for a couple of years, and I am deeply grateful for a free press, but I've been bothered many times by the way newspaper stories often hype the dramatic and sensational in their first two or three paragraphs, only to confess finally, if you keep reading, that the truth is not nearly so exciting as the headline hinted. So by the time you reach paragraph #5 in the story headlined "Rediscovering Mary," you find this admission: "Marian piety isn't exactly sweeping American Protestantism," which is a backhanded way of saying that not much is happening after all. So why write a story that suggests by its headline that Mary is at last becoming a major figure in Protestant religion?

Well, if you keep reading (which is a good way to make sure a headline hasn't deceived you), you make the real discovery: that the article was prompted by the words of a man named Wayne Weible who has written three books about a little Croatian mountain village called Medjugorje [pr. med-joo-gor-ia] where the locals claim to have seen apparitions of the Virgin Mary every day for the past 15 years. Mr. Weible says his books have sold well, and I am not surprised. Millions of us have an insatiable appetite for miracle and magic, and had rather see tears on the stone face of the Virgin, or Mother Teresa's face in the wrinkles of a breadloaf, than to pour time and energy into creating the kingdom of God on earth. Good people travel at great expense to Lourdes in France or to shrines in Mexico City; they rush off to obscure villages and pastures around the western world to take pictures of the Virgin's face which somebody claims to have seen in a sunset, or a cloud, or on the wall of an old church if you look at it when the morning sun first hits it.

No serious harm in any of that, I suppose, but it does puzzle many people who know the New Testament well, since Jesus never once hinted that his mother should be adored in those ways. One day, in fact, he suggested something quite different. He was preaching to large crowds, according to Mark's gospel (Chap. 3), when some of his relatives came to "take charge of him" because of concerns that he was out of his mind. Apparently he paid no attention, because after describing a brief debate between Jesus and some of his critics, Mark says, "Then his mother and his brothers arrived. They stood outside the house and sent a message asking him to come out to them. There was a crowd sitting around him when the message was brought telling him,

‘Your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you.’ Jesus replied, ‘And who are really my mother and my brothers?’ And looking round at the faces of those sitting in a circle about him, he said: ‘Look! My mother and my brothers are here. Anyone who does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother.’”

There is not even the faintest hint in that story that Jesus could have imagined a time when his mother would be revered above all other mortals who obey God. What he does, in fact, is put her on exactly the same level with anyone else who does the will of God. But obedience to the will of God can be wearisome and costly, and as Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor says in *The Brothers Karamazov*, religion for the masses depends on magic, mystery and miracle. I am not foolish enough to think I can change that — I’m just reminding you this morning that newspaper headlines and lead paragraphs are often misleading and if you care about truth, you may want to wade through to the end of such articles.

That’s one of the things I wanted to talk about in this sermon; here is the other one. I would like to pay tribute this morning to experience, that rather dull-sounding process by which people get practical wisdom from what they have lived through. How many of you in this room, parents or grandparents, have felt frustrated when you try to share what a lifetime of experience has taught you with a child or a grandchild, and realize that you have been totally tuned out? We think of the mistakes from which we might save someone just starting on the long road we have traveled, and we can’t resist passing along some things we’ve learned, but it very seldom

works. One of the sad conditions of life is that experience is rarely transferred. We seem to learn the important things the hard way....when they happen to us.

I have often wondered how effective the Biblical book of Proverbs was in ancient Hebrew life. It is nothing but a catalogue of experiences, a kind of school text meant to save the younger generation from at least some mistakes, but did the kids listen or did they yawn and forget it until one day the master teacher, Experience, taught them in pain or in shame what they might have learned much more easily.

“Soup just off the stove is hot,” I warned a little boy who used to sit at my table, but he really “got it” the day he scorched his tongue. An old German proverb comes from that common experience: “He who has burned his mouth, blows his soup.” The trouble with learning only by experience is that life is short and we’ve hardly started to correct some of our mistakes and pull together some smattering of wisdom about how to live than the darkness begins to fall and we have to lay down our tools. Horace Walpole wrote peevishly once that life has been badly planned, since experience comes at the wrong end of it — so late that once gained there’s no time left to use it. I like an old Belgian proverb: “Wisdom that comes too late is the comb that nature gives us when we are bald.”

This room always has more than its share of teachers - grade school, high school, college — who got into the profession because they wanted to give students a chance to learn some things more easily than by actual experience, but it’s never more than a partial success. Think of all those students who dropped by a few

years later to say, “I’ve learned the hard way that you were right. I wish I had paid more attention.” It’s a little disconcerting to hear that experience succeeded where our lectures failed, but once in a while we need to do what I am doing this morning and pay tribute to the power of experience. As one woman did the other day when she said, “A man never wakes up his *second* baby just to see it smile.”

This power of experiential knowledge affects our religious life, as well. We pray in unison every Sunday morning that we may be forgiven, but until we know by experience what it means to be deeply penitent, to ask forgiveness and receive it, there is an echo of unreality in what we say. We talk of the grace of God — sing a song from time to time about “amazing grace” — but until we have actually known that grace in our own lives the note of real passion is missing. We read or hear the eloquent words of others about how suffering may reward us with deeper wisdom than we could have any other way, but it is hard to believe until it actually happens to us.

I suppose I may be saying these things because I remember how young I was when I began to preach, and how everything I said was theory, taken from books. Christianity was a rumor, blown from other lives. I read a lot, but as Keats said once in a letter to his fellow poet Wordsworth, truth is not *really* truth until we have proved it on our pulses. “We read fine things,” he said, “but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the author.” That’s probably the real reason why no one should be in a pulpit at age 16, as I

was. Not because we can't learn to memorize scripture and recite the creeds of our church, but because we have no experiences that proves or begin to disprove those creeds on our pulses.

Grownups encouraged what I was doing in those first few years, and I was complimented sometimes as a speaker, but I think, looking back, that I could not have touched deeply the life of anyone who listened. Everything was theory, not a word of what I was saying had passed through my own life to touch what I said with real power. My audience would have understood the difference between theory and experience if someone had interrupted me one day as an English minister named John Hutton was interrupted in the midst of one of his sermons. A coal miner was suddenly so moved by the promise and power of the Gospel that he leapt to his feet and led the whole congregation in the doxology.

His passion and sincerity were so obvious that they went along, but he saw the surprise on their faces and explained that he had been a Christian only for a few months, and that it was all so gloriously different that he could not sit still in his pew. "I was a bad lot," he said. "I drank, I pawned the furniture, I knocked my wife about, and now life is real life, and splendidly worthwhile." Someone asked him how this kind of testimony went over with his rough fellow coalminers down in the pit. He laughed and admitted that they liked to tease his new faith. One said to him, "Surely you don't seriously credit that old fairytale about Jesus turning the water into wine?" He responded with a classic answer based on experience: "I know nothing about water and wine, but I know this, that in my house Christ has turned beer into furniture, and that is a good enough miracle for

me.” I can guarantee you that the people who heard that brief sermon from the text of living experience, remembered it for the rest of their lives.

The man who will speak from this pulpit next week did not begin his ministry, as I did, with no backlog of experiences. His call to ministry came in mid-life and led him to enroll in seminary. Although he has preached a few times, his compelling interest is in pastoral ministry — which is exactly why our committee to find an assistant at this church has invited him up for interviews. His minister and I have probably terrified him with stories of what an intelligent, critical audience he will face, so please make him feel comfortable. He is not being considered as a replacement in the pulpit, but as a pastoral minister who would provide an important supplement to my own ministry. I need some help, I have met this man and like him, but collective wisdom rules in a Congregational Church so whether he is the one for us will depend on your reaction, and on the reactions of our excellent Search Committee, which will interview him next Saturday. Please come back on Sunday.

May this grace rest upon each one of us through this week, Eternal
God, so that wherever we go we show quiet proof of the power
of love in our lives. Amen.