

THE DOUBLE CURE

Listening to the Two-Fold Call of God

Text: John 1:29-42

The PAT Approach to Problems

In recent years, educators in the Western world have been criticized for allegedly "dumbing down" their exams or making "social promotions" of students in order to compensate for increasingly poor student performances. I can't speak to the accuracy of those assertions, but I will confess to being a little worried by the proposed change of terminology under study by a major group of educators. According to ABC News, Great Britain's Professional Association of Teachers (PAT for short) has contemplated eliminating the word "fail" from classrooms. They want to replace it with the phrase, "deferred success." The theory is that banning negative language would help avoid the lasting problems associated with the labeling of pupils.

Now, I have some sympathy for inappropriate labeling and the damage it does. But, I got to thinking about the implications of applying this sort of "PAT-speak" to other areas of life. What if, in order to protect the feelings of pilots and the sentiments of the public, we just eliminated the term "plane crash" from FAA accident reports and simply spoke instead of "incomplete landings"? Suppose we got rid of the term "child abuse" and talked instead of "unrealized childcare"? Would that really be better for us? Would it help make passengers or kids safer?

And what if we applied the PAT approach to the sphere of religion and ethics? Maybe we should stop using hurtful terms like "selfish, lying, cheating, lusting or unforgiving" and speak instead of "delayed obedience." Hey, it's not "moral failure" when I curse somebody out, or love booze more than people, or spend more on personal entertainment than on charity toward others; it's just "deferred righteousness."

This is the kind of "easy speak" increasingly common today. But as Marti Pieper suggests, this PAT approach has "farther-reaching consequences" than merely unsuccessful students. It fosters a mentality that leaves too many people ill equipped to compete or thrive in today's world. Sometimes, we need hard words to help us face hard issues, for it is in facing them squarely that we become open to their real remedy.

Daring to Name the Core Issue

There were so many problems afoot in the early first century. If you'd interviewed the average person on the street, they'd have said the problem in

Israel was “deferred potential.” If you asked people, “WHY IS ISRAEL’S POTENTIAL DEFERRED?” you’d have heard a set of common answers: “Taxes are too high.” “The Roman government is too intrusive.” “There are too many immigrants crossing our borders from Africa and Arabia and Syria and Turkey” – so many freeloaders and culture-diluters dragging us down. “The wealthy have all the power.” “The land’s getting raped of its resources.” “People just aren’t as concerned about each other as they should be or used to be.” I’m not stretching it to say that these sorts of things appeared to be the major problems at that time, as they often appear to be in ours. And they ARE issues, just not the core one.

If you’d gone out into the wilderness beyond Jerusalem where the broadcasts of a passionate prophet by the name of John was drawing an expanding audience, you’d have heard a different explanation of the nation’s problems. The core issue, said John, is that we are sinners in need of repentance (Matt 3:1-2). You can spin the terminology or dilute the language any way you like, but beneath all the political and social issues of our time is a spiritual one.

The core issue is that we no longer have the spiritual strength or moral vision to solve our country’s problems. Alienated from our Creator, our character has been compromised. We’ve gotten too wrapped up in our own comforts and convenient rationalizations. We have grown too unwilling to make sacrifices, too hard-hearted toward one another. Weighed down by so many moral failures and too little rest, we increasingly look to our drugs and distractions for relief. But, like Israel of old, what we need is to “Repent!” We need to stop in our tracks, turn our hearts toward God, and humbly beg for his divine forgiveness and help. “Look,” says John, “Turn toward the Lamb of God, who takes away the SIN of the world” (John 1:29).

For things to get better in this great School we call “Life,” we can’t treat sin with a PAT approach. Sin has to be named for what it is – the core problem of humanity – the serious condition responsible for our failure to have the kind of life or world we could. Each of us has to deal with the reality of sin on a personal level. I’ve got to acknowledge that MY character is part of what stops my family, workplace, church, and nation from being what it could be. If I want things to get better out there, then I need to start in here, by turning toward Christ and asking him to forgive me, free me, and help me live differently.

The good news that John the Baptizer points us toward is that in Jesus Christ, God has made that new life possible. On the cross, Jesus became the sacrificial lamb by whose blood the price of sin was paid, the debt of sin was cleared, and the power of sin to finally define or defeat us was broken. Now, whoever turns to him in humble repentance can find complete forgiveness and a new beginning to life. Have you found that for yourself? If not, let today be the day. Ask God to forgive you and either start or renew the journey of following

him today.

Personal Conversion Leads to Public Engagement

I guess most of us know that we are celebrating this weekend the life and witness of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. There are a whole list of reasons why that is a good idea. But one of them is because Dr. King got this. He got the truth that our nation's problems couldn't be treated with a PAT approach.

Dr. King saw that the divisions and difficulties going on in America were fundamentally spiritual problems before they were social ones. As an Asian scholar of King's life has observed, time and again, people around him would try to reduce his movement to "achieving black freedom" or "winning equal rights." But as commendable as those ends might be, Dr. King kept reminding his followers that this was not their primary goal. They were out for nothing less than "to save the soul of America." Only a spiritual revival could bring about a lasting social renewal.

Like John the Baptist before him, Martin Luther King urged Americans to follow the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:36-37). But King also understood that once we begin to deal with sin at a personal level -- once God baptizes us into the new life of his kingdom -- we can no longer tolerate the stain of sin at the public level. The more connected with God we become, the more our self-sealed, self-securing focus gets replaced by his outgoing concern for the welfare of other people.

I know that has been true for me. I've been following Jesus for a long time now. But the further I have walked with him, the more I find my heart turned outward toward the needs of others, the more my heart gets broken by the things that break his heart.

One of the things God gave me an ache about several years ago was the disunity between churches. I drove by all these churches in our area and thought, "Gosh, these are my brothers and sisters. We're all branch offices of the same company. Why aren't we praying for one another? There are so many huge needs. Why aren't we working together?" And so I began a stealth campaign. I started dropping in on churches. I began making appointments for breakfast, coffee, or lunch with the senior pastors of some smaller local churches and with the senior pastors of the other large churches in our county. At first there was a bit of suspicion. But, over time, some wonderful relationships began to form across denominational and racial lines. I now meet for sharing, prayer, and collaboration with two groups of area pastors each month.

A few weeks back we all came together – some 57 of us – right here at Christ Church. We came to face the brutal fact that some of the worst poverty in the

State of Illinois is right here in DuPage County. We came to start figuring out how we might work together to mobilize tens of thousands of Christians across our region to bring the life-changing love to some people who really need it. Two of the neighborhoods where help is needed most are not very far from here.

This past Tuesday I heard the story of a little boy in one of those neighborhoods. He lives in a single-parent family to whom a volunteer I'll call "Joe" had been coming for several months now. The boy confided to his mom that until "Joe" came along, he didn't know that there were men who didn't hit and hurt. How many kids like that are out there? What happens to kids who grow up with abusers or addicts or exhausted despairing adults as their only mentors? You know the answer: They become like them. What difference would it make to our society if the next generation of poor kids grew up with different kinds of role models? How many of us could be one of them?

Following Jesus for Life

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote: "From time immemorial people have lived by the principle that self-preservation is the first law of life. But this is a false assumption. I would say that other-preservation is the first law of life. It is the first law of life precisely because we cannot preserve self without being concerned about preserving other selves. The universe is so structured that things go awry if men are not diligent in their cultivation of the other-regarding dimension. 'I' cannot reach fulfillment without 'thou.' The self cannot be self without other selves."

Jesus put it this way when asked what the greatest commandments were: **"Love God with everything you are and love others as if they were you"** (paraphrase of Matt 22:37-38). What kind of world could we make, if we actually followed Jesus' instructions there? Dallas Willard, the great USC philosopher, once remarked that it is regretful that "The Lord is my shepherd" is written on many more tombstones than lives." But we could be the exception. We could dedicate ourselves in this New Year to following the Good Shepherd with the kind of obedient courage displayed by Peter and Andrew and Martin Luther King and many others God has used to bless this world.

Let me close by encouraging you to make your own a wonderful prayer contained in the words of the old hymn, Rock of Ages: "Let the water and the blood, from thy wounded side which flowed, be of sin the double-cure, save from wrath and make me pure."

If you've never done so before, ask God to save you from the wrath of judgment; put your trust not in your goodness but in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

If you've already done that, then ask the Good Shepherd to make your heart

pure like His is. Pray that your life may be less about preserving self and more about lifting up others.

LISTEN: There's not a PAT solution to the sin that afflicts our personal and public life today. No tinkering with terminology or running after superficial fixes will repair what most deeply ails us. But, in Jesus Christ, there IS a double-cure.

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