

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Curate

Scripture: Acts 14:8-18

Missing the Point

First, I would like to acknowledge some very special people, a great many of whom are present this morning – and without whom we most likely wouldn't be here. Each one of us are blessed that we have had someone in our life that has provided so much for us – especially in our early years. Times when we fell down and were helped up, times when we didn't feel so good – and we were lovingly nursed back to health, times when we were afraid and our fears were replaced by loving comfort. Today – we acknowledge and honor our Mothers – those remarkable women whose love and nurture have been an irreplaceable part of making us who we are – and for that we applaud you, and ask Almighty God's blessing upon you. You will always have our gratitude, our admiration and our love.

You may have heard about the young mother that followed the instructions on the aspirin bottle when she had an excruciating headache? She followed those directions to a T – they said - take two aspirin: keep away from children. Do you think she may have missed the point?

Have you ever wondered why certain people miss the point in many sermons? There are so many that misunderstand the meaning of God's message for a great number of reasons. When Jesus told His parables – many wondered just what He was talking about. When Peter addressed the thousands on the day of Pentecost – we are told that three thousand were baptized that day. I can only imagine how many more didn't have ears to hear what he had to say that day! When Paul and Barnabas addressed the Jews in the synagogue – “they stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.” (Acts 13:50)

In today's reading from the Book of Acts, when the crowds saw how the Lord had used Paul to heal the man of Lycaonia, their first reaction was that they have been visited by the gods and they cried out, “The gods have become like men and have come down to us.” (Acts 14:11) People's failure to grasp the essential truths in the Holy Scriptures is mainly caused because of inadequate or faulty learning. You know the old saying – **garbage in – garbage out**. When you are taught fudge – you produce fudge – when you are taught to fruitfully recognize the truth – you bear good fruit and the truth continues to be told.

Many people misinterpret the truth because of their inability to understand God's nature, purpose and power. The people of Lycaonia believed that Barnabas was Zeus, the god of thunder and ruler of Mount Olympus, and that Paul was Zeus' son - Hermes the messenger of the gods – because they had no truth to base their judgment on – not knowing God. When people have a faulty perception of God, or let's call it a weak foundation, they will fall down in their understanding of His truth, His power, His processes and His people. In fact, they just miss the point!

It's like the elderly woman standing at the airline ticket counter: She says to the ticket attendant “Please what ever you do - don't give me a window seat. I don't want my new hairdo to get messed up!” Oh, boy- was she ever missing the point!

About just as perplexing is the time from the 1960s when California Bishop James Pike decided the **Holy Trinity did not exist** and that **there had been no Virgin Birth**. Despite these “revelations” he decided to remain at his post as a “Christian” leader. Heresy charges were brought against Bishop Pike but apparently there was neither the will nor the numbers to move forward with the charges. Whether the House of Bishops were overwhelmed by the counterculture of that era, or maybe Pike's disbeliefs were

widely shared, the Episcopal Church failed to reprimand the obstinate, heretic bishop. **Talk about missing the point!** Look at the effect it has had on generations to follow.

The Apostle Paul warned us that such times were coming. **Please turn to page 1085** in your pew Bibles and find **2 Timothy 3:1-7**. Listen to these words from **2 Timothy 3:1-7** *"You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them! For among them are those who make their way into households and captivate silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires, who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth."* If that doesn't describe the times in which we live I don't know what does.

It was October 11, 2001 – exactly one month after September 11, 2001 – my family and I mustered up the courage to venture onto an airplane and fly from Jacksonville Fl. to Pittsburgh, PA. We were going to visit Trinity School for Ministry for the very first time. The 15 minute appointment that we had turned into 2 and one half hours – and at the end of the time – I was handed a sheet of paper. Pam and Wicks Stevens, who were doing the interview, told me to look over this Statement of Faith – and if there was anything I disagreed with – that I should not even consider coming to Trinity to attend seminary. Right before me, in writing, was a list of beliefs – very much like the Creeds – and of course we all agreed with them. Interestingly enough, we were scheduled to visit a certain Theological Seminary located very near our nation's capitol, in Virginia – which will go unnamed. I called them and asked their admissions department to email me or send me a copy of their statement of faith. Their response was quite clear – "we don't have one!" She continued to tell me that everything they believed was in their extensive catalogue. There in the midst of their catalogue we found the words "the Holy Spirit reveals new truths on a daily basis." Our immediate reaction was "What?" "New Truths?" Excuse me – **can we talk about faulty learning and weak foundation?** It is seminaries like this that are sending ministers into the world that don't believe that Jesus' words are truth, and that He is the way and the truth and the life, that there are many ways to heaven, and that don't believe in the divinity of Jesus. We are being fed lines - instead of truth we are told that we are to honor our differences of opinion. My brothers and sisters – opinion is one thing and truth is a whole different subject. If it is not light – it is darkness, if it is not truth - it is... what? If one wanted to be politically correct we could say untruths, or fabrications, possibly even misinterpretation – but the fact remains that the lack of truth is one thing – nothing but lies. Faulty learning indeed!

Faulty learning, just like that of the Lycaonians can be caused by any of the following reasons:

- Pride – each one of us must humbly ask God to give us the understanding to discern His truth for our lives. We are not simply to observe and interpret truth without first asking the Lord to speak to your hearts.
- Worry – Do not allow your attention to be so engaged in something that you fail to catch the essence of what God is trying to teach you. You'll find yourself living in the proverbial "what was that?"
- Poor Interpretation– failing to understand the truth in its context along with the main theme of its corresponding passage of scripture. It is always important to understand the context of what you are reading!
- Asking Wrong Questions – If you fail to ask the right questions you will usually get the wrong answers.

Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 13, 2007, Liturgical Year "C"

- Poor listening – Failure to listen and observe what is really being said and not just how it is spoken can cause one to miss the main point.
- Lack of Attention – Failure to pay attention to the entire message or scripture until you understand the main lessons will most certainly cause faulty learning.
- Distractions – Try to filter out the external or internal noises that may keep you from learning all that is essential. For example – what if a cell phone rang right now?
- Get rid of the Negatives – Put away all bitterness, anger or fear against the message or, for that matter, the speaker. Let the message change your mind according to the truth about your God-given responsibilities.
- Misunderstanding – We must be willing to admit when we need to change an incomplete or faulty assumption and willing to graciously accept correction.

It is vitally important that we ask the Lord to help us to avoid all of the above faulty learning tendencies, and to keep us focused on the message that He has for us.

Paul and Barnabas lovingly corrected the people of the Lycaonia region, directing them to the eternal source of truth, power and love – the Living God, who made heaven and earth. When people miss the point, do not just slam them and berate them, instead point them to the source of all truth, love and power. Ask the Lord to help you correct people with tact, gentleness and cultural sensitivity.

The apostles used the healing experience to demonstrate how God is concerned for all people in every situation. When people are convinced how God's love transcends all classes, languages, groups and problems, they are drawn to Him. We must never let our limited and finite understanding hinder what God wants to do with all people everywhere through Christ's power. Doing that would be limiting God. We need to ask God to help us present Christ more as a God who indeed cares about every aspect of individual's lives regardless of their backgrounds. All they need to do is come to Him, to seek His face. His love is transforming. Doing otherwise would be missing the point.

The apostles saw the horrible outcome of people who missed the point. The esteem of the Lycaonians proved fickle and faithless. The same hands that were willing to offer sacrifices to the Paul and Barnabas were soon busy throwing stones at them. False sincerity always ends in unrighteousness.

Several months ago I stood here and spoke to you about people in the church who are most certainly missing the point. I spoke about the Rev. Marcus Borg who questions the Divinity of Jesus. I spoke about The Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong – the former Bishop of New Jersey who published his infamous 12 Theses in regard to Jesus - which clearly in my opinion misses the point. He questions Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection and ascension to name a few.

Now let me tell you about The Rev. Dr. Giles Fraser, the Vicar of St. Mary's Church, Putney, in London and a lecturer at Oxford, who says this about theology: "the idea of God murdering his son for the salvation of the world is morally indefensible. It turns Christianity into cosmic child abuse." (Giles Fraser, "Cross Purposes," The Guardian, April 4, 2007) Dr. Fraser is indeed missing the point – and I venture to say that he will be missing the boat! That is not my opinion alone – listen to these words from the Apostle Paul in **1 Corinthians 1:18** "*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*" Jesus willingly went to the cross – He was not forced – but willingly gave of Himself so that those who believe in Him may live.

Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 13, 2007, Liturgical Year "C"

Like the Apostle Paul, we are to do our best to lovingly correct those who are in error – those missing the point that just don't get it. Sadly, it may however come down to following the Lord's instructions and shaking the dust off and moving on. All we can do is remain faithful to God's Holy Word – keeping in mind Jesus' very own words that we heard in today's Holy Gospel: Please turn with me to the back page of your Bulletin: *"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me."* (John 14:23-24)

There is no grey area – simply black and white: You either know and recognize the truth or you don't. If you look to Jesus as your source of truth, of hope, and of love then you know the truth - and that truth is undeniable. **Jesus is the way and the truth and the life – and the light of His truth shines in every word of Holy Scripture.** As Jesus said – if you love Him – you will keep His Word – if not – sadly you are missing the point.