

The Grammar of Change

The Second Sunday After Epiphany

January 20, 2008

Isaiah 49:1-7, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-41, Psalm 40:1-10

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One of my pet peeves is when people respond to a question with a question. It happens to me all the time when, for instance, I enter a retail store. Being a bit of a gregarious sort, I am usually the one to greet the greeter, not the other way around. I usually ask “How are you?” or “What’s going on?”. The almost invariable response is something like “How can I help you?”. This doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t answer my question. It’s nonsensical. Answering questions with questions generally is.

It appears that this sort of silliness goes on in our Gospel reading. Jesus asks the disciples what they are looking for. They respond with a question. “Where are you staying?”, they ask Jesus. Silly? Not in this instance. Because this is the rare instance where Jesus’ question can only be properly responded to with a question. “What are you looking for?” Some translations read: “What do you want?” The reason the disciples can only answer with a question is because what they want is Jesus. They don’t see him as a means to an end. He is their end. He is their goal. He is their desire. He’s what they want. They want to be where he is. “What do you want?”...”Where are you staying?”.

There’s a phrase, “I’d give anything in the world if I could...”. Let me give you some advice. Totally disregard whatever follows it. I might say, “I’d give anything in the world to play the piano like John French.” I’d give anything in the world except what it actually took to play the piano that well: the education, the practice, the dedication. “I’d give anything in the world if I could...”. It’s a throw away phrase. In any given moment we do exactly what we want to do most. We always do what we most deeply want to. This is why the response of the disciples is so deep and so profound. They want Jesus, more than anything. And if you want change, real change, transformative change, substantial change, you have to be willing to want Jesus the way disciples did. You have to be willing to wait for him, to wait for him, ultimately to be able to wander after him for real change, change that’s different from any other change you’ve ever known. How is it different? For that we need to look to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians.

I don’t know how much you know about the Church at Corinth. They were certainly not spiritual super stars. In fact much of Corinthians is simply Paul’s correction and rebuke to this fledgling Christian community. And yet he can begin this letter calling them saints. They don’t lack any spiritual gift. He’s confident that their spiritual legacy will be a

lasting one. How? And why? It's all in the grammar. Paul understands the relationship between the indicative and the imperative.

An indicative statement tells you how things are. It's snowing outside. The sanctuary is being renovated. Scott is handsome and charming. These are all indicative statements. They tell you how things are. Imperatives on the other hand tell you what you have to or should do. Take out the garbage. Pay your taxes. Wrap up this sermon, and fast! These are all imperative statements. What religion invariably does, along with all other approaches to ultimate fulfillment, is make the indicative dependent on the imperative. Pray and you'll be blessed. Live a righteous life and God will love you. Study the right texts and you'll be enlightened. Be successful and people will love you. These statements all rest who you are on what you have to do. The gospel is just the opposite. It puts the indicative first, from which the imperative flows. The Gospel declares that in Jesus you're loved by God, claimed by God, delivered by God, made new by God, enriched by God, embraced by God. Then you're called to live in light of the new reality God has brought about in Christ and through the Spirit. This is so different. Once you know you're changed by God everything changes, and you can have real, transformative change because the source of change so radically changes. No longer are you chasing after the indicative, bending over backward to fulfill imperatives. The indicative has changed, and so does your life. Indicative, then imperative. It makes all the difference.

I don't know how many of you have seen *Chariots of Fire*. It's about two runners. One Eric Liddle, who is a deeply committed Christian, is asked why he runs. He responds, "God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure." That's the freedom brought about when the indicative determines the imperative. Later Harold Abrams is asked the same question. He responds, "I run because when that gun goes off, I know have 10 seconds to justify my existence." That's the crushing pressure and bondage that comes when the imperative determines the indicative.

Jesus changes everything. When you wait for him, then wander after him, everything changes, including the way you approach change, because you've been changed in the deepest, most powerful way the world has ever known. That's the good news of the Gospel. Thanks be to God! AMEN.