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About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



Not Preaching to the Choir

The Rev. Canon David M. Baumann

Once, early in my ordained ministry, I received a telephone call at about 3:00AM, asking me to come to a certain hospital. It seemed that two young men had gone joy-riding. A 17-year-old man named John (not his real name) had been a passenger in the front seat of a car that flew off the freeway at about 90 miles per hour. He had been hurled through the windshield and was being kept alive by life-support machines. The driver was hospitalized and in traction with spinal cord injuries.

I did not know John, although his widowed grandmother was a member of the church where I was serving as curate, and my frequent visits to her ramshackle home had been most delightful. I would play well-known evangelical hymns on her old piano, and we would belt out the praises of God together. Each morning at about 5:00AM, she called one of her friends, and they would read to each other out of large-print Bibles and pray together. Although a very dedicated evangelical Christian, she was in poor health and almost blind, which restricted her ministries to invariably being present at church each Sunday and singing and praying exuberantly, given the opportunity.

When I arrived at the hospital, about 3:45AM, John's immediate family was present. It was obvious that he could not survive, and together we decided to remove him from the life-support systems. He died a few hours later. I also visited the driver, who was in a different hospital. I paid him only that one visit, and never found out what happened to him.

Several days later, the rector and I were preparing for John's funeral. Just before we entered the church, we peeked through the door to see what the congregation was like. The evangelical grandmother was in her usual place in the front row with her daughter (the young man's mother) and a few other family members next to her. There were also about two hundred members of motorcycle gangs, festooned with tattoos, shoulder-length hair (or longer), leather jackets, chains and various club insignias. Without batting an eye or changing his expression, the rector said to me, "You preach." Then we entered the church.

Even under the circumstances of untimely death and grief, I saw humor in the situation and asked myself what I had to lose by preaching a real ripsnorter of an evangelical sermon. At the very least, the grandmother would like it, and I would let God do with it whatever He would for others. There are few better opportunities than a funeral to preach the Gospel to those most needful of it, and those unlikely to hear it in any other setting. The congregation at almost every funeral will include at least one such person.

I ascended the pulpit to preach. I told the congregation that we were sorry that John had died, that it wasn't God's will that he had died and that it was a tragedy. The only one present whose faith I was sure of was the grandmother, so I talked about her faith and how I enjoyed visiting with her.

Then I said, "John apparently did not have the kind of faith that his grandmother has. I do not know for sure, because I never met him until his last night in the hospital, when he was being kept alive by machines. But what I *do* know for sure is that, if he had had that kind of faith, he would be at peace now. He also might not have been driving around in the early hours of the morning at 90 miles per hour. But that is not important now. The important thing is that his grandmother — and many other people, too — know the power of God's love to change lives and to cast out all fear. And this power is free for the asking, and is available today."

I went on to talk about the most basic building blocks of a saving faith in Jesus as the only remedy for death and the best context for grieving. The entire congregation was very quiet and seemed to be very intent.

After the funeral, we went in procession to the cemetery for the burial. Behind the hearse was a long line of motorcycles. As we drove off, the motorcycles started up with loud "Vroooms!" and peeled out after the hearse. When we arrived, six of the leather-jacketed men carried the body of their friend to its grave.

There was a reception at the family's home afterward, and I attended just to see if anyone might want to talk informally about what I had said in the sermon. Many did. As soon as I walked through the front gate, one fellow with a long, straggly, black beard saw me and gestured urgently. "C'mere, c'mere!" he urged. "We want to know more about Jesus!"

About a dozen bikers surrounded me, beer cans in their hands. They asked me to stand on a picnic table so they could all hear and see. The crowd grew to 20 or more. They wanted to know what Jesus was like, what he did all day, how he did his miracles, what it all meant. They asked questions about Jesus and the Bible that had likely come from childhood memories long set aside. The conversation went on for about an hour.

The following Sunday, about three came to church services for the first and, as far as I know, the only time. Their presence caused quite a stir among some of the regular church members. I don't know what God did with them after that, but those earnest inquiries from a group of bikers — "We want to know more about Jesus!" — taught me more about the natural attractiveness of Jesus than nearly anything else I've ever known.



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