

“Exuberant Modesty”

By Rev. José F. Morales Jr., Executive Regional Minister

Job 36.26-33/Luke 24.28-31 CEB

Sermon preached during Worship at General Board
At Sheraton Hotel--City Centre, Indianapolis, Indiana
Sunday, February 9, 2014: Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

We are all too sure of ourselves. We are too certain of our belief.

The civil religion of our day, served by their pseudo-priests on the news media outlets, proclaims an all-too-certain doctrine of “America” as God's country, God as American, and in some outlets, of Jesus as white.

The conservative expressions within our Christian family put all their eggs, uncritically, in a received, stale, stifling dogmatism, completely assured that their formulation of the Faith is right, though it is completely detached from present realities and needs.

The liberal family of faith many times is all too sure of its methods of inquiry, too certain of its deconstructing methodologies, leading to a sort of annoying liberal hubris, and ironically to an ethnocentrism that gives all interpretive power to higher-critical, dead Germans from the 1800s, and like conservatives, uncritically adopting a different sort of dogmatism.

We are all too sure of ourselves. We are too certain of our belief.

Our call to worship this morning comes to us from Elihu, one of Job's “friends”, who seeks to console him in the midst of his suffering and lost. But apparently, though the sun shines in unspeakable places every once in while during his speech, Elihu is doing a horrible job with Job.

You see, Elihu is quite the arrogant theologian, all too sure of himself and his doctrines. Mind you, the section we read is spot on, worthy of a call to worship; it's Elihu at his finest--bad timing but at his finest. The rest is just awful and in no way attentive or comforting to a grieving Job. It's full of religious cliches, detached axioms and false assumptions.

But Elihu is enthralled with his own genius. Earlier in chapter 36, Elihu tells his friend, "My words are *certainly* truthful; one with [*perfect*] knowledge is present with you." *Well, excuse me, Elihu!*

The bible scholar James Wharton rightly points out that Elihu is in the text, in the story, to serve a mockery, “a caricature of all religious or intellectual arrogance.”¹

¹ J. Wharton, *Job* (WJK), 151.

We have way to many Elihu's in the world, in the Church. We are all too sure of ourselves, of our belief.

When I first came to the Disciples of Christ,
 by way of the Presbyterians,
 by way of the Lutherans,
 by way of Willow Creek,
 by way of the American Baptists,
 by way of the Pentecostals,

I had my Elihu-ish proclivities. I was all too sure that my training, my experience (including my experience "in the Holy Ghost"), my memorized database of bible verses at my disposal, meant that I had all this stuff figured out, that the "one with perfect knowledge had come to your midst."

But there was great danger in my arrogant assuredness of faith. Clearly, my own soul was in danger. But I am more concern about was the damage I inflicted on others. I think of things I've preached and proclaimed, teachings I've shared and embodied that have hurt and wounded others in the church. I--I still do--I stay awake, wondering about my wandering words, the wounds they may have cause the Body of Christ. In fear and trembling, I wonder.

We are all too sure of ourselves. We are too certain of our belief.

In my spare time [insert sarcasm here] ...*in my spare time*, I jump on Disciples Exchange on Facebook. And for the most part, they are wonderful, vibrant conversations happening, a generous sharing of ideas and innovations. I love it! But every so often, Elihu shows up:

Elihu on the left and Elihu on the right;
 charismatic Elihu and the staunch liturgist Elihu;
 the McGravey Elihu and the Willet Elihu.

Everyone once in a while, the one with *perfect* knowledge makes a virtual appearance on Facebook.

We are all too sure of ourselves.

In my Regional ministry in Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, northern New Mexico, and southeast Idaho, I meet clergy, seminarians and lay folks interesting in Disciples, exploring the Disciples of Christ tradition. And as you may imagine I get the perennial question: well, what do Disciples believe?

As you can imagine, this is not easy to answer.

With libertarian Disciples ranchers in the eastern plains, and with former Mormons in Utah,

With Tea Party folks in Cañon City and communist community organizers in Denver,

With evangelicals in Littleton and revisionist liberals in Boulder,

With young artsy hipsters and old artificial hips...
...this is not easy to answer.

What do Disciples believe?

Well, to answer this question, I first *highlight* that in our Regional Church we do have faithful, committed...

libertarian ranchers and former Mormons,
Tea Party folks and communist community organizers,
Evangelicals and liberals,
artsy hipsters and artificial hips.

...Which usually leads to a follow-up question, a question I love... I love *this* question: What holds all these people together? Is there any belief that you all share?

My answer is simple: At our best ...*at ...our ...best*, Disciples are marked by theological modesty.

We are modest, tempered, in our way of doing theology. That is to say, at our best,

...we recognize that God is indeed beyond our grasp and thus the best way to discern God's will and way is in community.

...we recognize with St. Paul that we only know in part and our best discovery is none together.

...we affirm that diversity of thought is not a hurdle to overcome but a gift to lived into and enjoyed.

At our best... we are a people marked by theological modesty,

open to the the new thing that God may teach us from people with whom we may not agree,

open to the new thing God is doing,

open to the God who surprises us at every turn.

And in a world full of Elihu's, this is a gift we share with the church and world.

Now, this requires further qualification. For I think our slip-ups and hang-ups comes from misunderstanding what theological modesty entails. To be clear, we need to know what theological modesty is *not*.

Theological modesty does not mean that we cannot argue passionately about what we believe; that we can only speak in vague generalities so as to not offend. That we can only speak of God as a vague blob of divinity.

We *can* have deep convictions and passions, and still be modest. Look at the exchanges--*fiery* exchanges--amongst our Stone-Campbell predecessors. They fought! (Oh they fought!) But it was a modest disposition to speak about God, and to each other, that kept them talking, that kept them together at the Table.

I don't know if you're aware of this, but we as a General Assembly recently grappled with a controversial, divisive resolution, a certain GA1327 that caused some stir within our Disciples family. Well, Regions and congregations have had to deal with this aftermath.

Last year, I met with the board and elders of one of our most conservative congregations in the Region--a congregation I love very, very much. So I told the pastor, "All right! Gather the leadership. Let's chat."

And boy, we fought. Oh, we fought passionately. At one point, I yelled at them, "I'm sick and tired of you conservatives thinking that we liberal don't know the bible or love the bible. So if you want to have a bible dedate"—I grabbed a bible and slammed it in front of me—"bring it!" We fought. But we kept talking. And we cried. And they "brought it!" And I learned from them. And I hope they learned from me.

Theological doesn't mean that we can't fight every so often.

Moreover, theological modesty is not theological *laziness*. Modesty does not mean that we avoid the hard conversations and the hard reflection that needs to be had in the Church. We need, we must, have these conversations, especially now, as the spiritual tectonic plates shift under our feet.

Unfortunately, instead of the rigors, the hard work, of theological exploration in community, we have opted for laziness and avoidance. And this lazy avoidance has fed into our pre-existing ambiguity about who we are. And when coupled with our ecclesial inability to stand in the midst of tension, this lazy ambiguity has led to an watered-down, all-permissiveness when it comes to understanding who we are as a Disciples movement.

In this theology ambiguity and laziness, we hear things like:

*Oh, Disciples? You can believe whatever you want (and you can keep your building too).
Disciples are Baptists with Communion every week.*

The grace of exuberant modesty has become the curse of laziness.

But theological modesty is *not* believing in nothing or in anything. (God forbid!) Rather, theological modesty means that we hold belief with fear and trembling, recognizing (unlike Elihu) that we do not have *perfect* knowledge. Modesty calls us to affirm faith with awe and wonder, in the presence of a God who is truly "exalted and unknowable," whose years are "beyond counting."

At our best, we hold our beliefs modestly. At our best, we Disciples are graced and guided by theological modesty.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus got a lesson in theological modesty, from Jesus himself. Now, we as Disciples... we cherish this story. It's a bread and cup story, so it forms a

central part of our "canon." We love stories about bread and cup. I am sure we have heard and/or preached countless sermons on the walk to Emmaus. I still remember Rev. Bill Lee's treatment on this text: "the table never misses."

And particularly, we love to twist in the story when Christ becomes visible, manifest... *known*, in the breaking of the Bread. And I love this!. My eucharistic theology, my understanding of the Table, is that Christ is *especially* present (*quick* presence) among the assembled when we partake of the emblems, when we share of bread and wine. Hallelujah!

But I actually believe that the bigger lesson, the more shocking twist, of the gastronomic encounter in Emmaus, is not that Jesus shows up; but that Jesus disappears—*quickly* disappears.

Before we could contain and control Jesus,
 Before we could misuse and abused him,
 Before we could encrust him in jewels and enshrine him in dogma,
 Before we could codify him in creed,
 Before we could systematize and summarize him,
 Before our consumeristic hands can give him a marketable makeover,
 ...he disappears. He disappears, if to say, "Don't think you've got me figured out." He vanishes quickly as if to stump, to root out, the Elihu in all of us.

"Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight."

Theological modesty keeps us open to the elusive yet transformative presence of Christ in our midst. Only a modest theology can serve us when speaking of a God of resurrecting, *surprising* new life. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams masterfully puts it,
 "God always has the capacity to do something fresh and different, to bring something new out of a situation."²

"Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight."

And what a better way to nurture our theological modesty than through worship! Worship is an act of theological modesty. Modesty is both the means and ends to worship. It's no coincidence that Jesus decides to do his disappearing trick at the Table. It's no coincidence that this story is found in the Gospel of Luke, with its strong liturgical interests—a gospel that begins with the canticles of Mary and Simeon and ends with this story, which most scholars believe to be at reenactment of the early Christian gatherings around Word and Sacrament.

For in worship...

² R. Williams, *Tokens of Trust* (WJK), 16.

...we in our limited knowledge encounter a God of limitless love!
...we with our confined souls experience the Spirit that blows where it wills!
...we come to the Table where we get a glimpse, a fleeting, modest glimpse of the Risen Christ!
...our modest sensibilities are honed.

And fortunately for us, we're in worship right now! *Hallelujah!* And in a little bit, we're going to come to the Table. So I urge you this morning, with a modest heart, to partake of the Bread and the Cup.

But whatever you do, don't blink.