

A Reasonable Faith?

John 1:1- 8

December 31, 2006

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I want you to think way back to September, 2006 to an event that made headline news. On September 12, 2006, Pope Benedict preached a sermon at the University of Regensburg in Germany. Remember that? The newspapers reported that Pope Benedict had made a politically incorrect remark concerning the Islamic faith. In response, Muslims loudly objected and some participated in protest marches. Not a few Muslims demanded an apology. At first Pope Benedict refused to apologize, remember? After all, he was accurately quoting a Byzantine Emperor. That quote is the stuff of history. After significant negative repercussions, however, Pope Benedict did apologize, an act which we should applaud. Apologies are never easy, particularly when they are so public. To his credit, too, he determined that he needed to mend some fences—which he is doing today. You will note that in November, Pope Benedict visited Istanbul, a Muslim city. That is the first time a pope has visited that city since the 11th century. While in Istanbul he made other moves to extend friendship toward Muslims.

Back in September, I was really curious as to what Pope Benedict actually had said that caused such ill will. I read through the text of Pope Benedict's entire speech, and I found what he had to say, compelling, even though I disagreed with a lot of it. I promised myself that one day I would preach on what Pope Benedict had to say, I just needed to wait for the right Sunday! Well, today is that Sunday! It's been a great week for me, putting down on paper some of what I have been thinking about these many months.

First of all, let's refresh our memories. In his address back in September, Benedict quotes Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus. This is the emperor, who, in the year 1391, engaged in a conversation with an unnamed scholarly Persian Muslim. That conversation was written down and preserved for posterity. The Emperor had this to say to the Persian: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." The Emperor also said, as was quoted by Benedict elsewhere in his speech, "God, is not pleased by blood—and not acting reasonably...is contrary to God's nature.Not to act with ... [reason], is contrary to the nature of God."

The first of those quotes, again, "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and

inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.” is a lead in to the topic of the pope’s speech: the reasonable and non-violent nature of right faith, particularly as it is practiced by the Roman Catholics. Although Pope Benedict doesn’t outright say so, the clear implication is that the Islamic tradition is not so reasonable and non-violent. Muslims, then, had every right to take offense at his remarks. In fact, I’ve got to tell you that Pope Benedict’s remarks put my own nose a little bit out of joint, too. Pope Benedict says in that same speech that Protestants tried to purify the Christian faith by cleansing it of all things Greek, including Greek thought and philosophy. That is absolutely true. During the reformation a catch phrase of the reformists was SOLO SCRIPTURA—scripture alone—in other words, let’s purify the faith of worn out traditions and Greek philosophy and get back to the basics—which was scripture. If Pope Benedict had stopped there, that would have been fine. But the pope goes on to say that Protestantism, too, since it is not based on Greek philosophy is unreasonable and therefore seriously flawed. Whatsay?!

Pope Benedict bases much of his argument regarding the reasonableness of faith, on our scripture passage for today: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.” Now before we return to Pope Benedict’s speech I need to give you a little more information about that perplexing sentence. What, for heaven’s sake does it mean? If that line has always had you scratching your head, you’re not alone. Scholars are still not sure what the author of John was saying. One thing that they do know, though, is that the book of John was written in Greek. The Greek word for “word” is logos, which also means reason. So, did the author of John really mean word or did he mean reason? Let me read this passage again, as many theologians, including Pope Benedict, understand it. “In the beginning was REASON, and REASON was with God and REASON was God.” That is a powerful statement, isn’t it? That is to say, God from the very beginning of the universe, when it was not yet formed, when it was not yet even molten rock and swirling gases, even before that time, God was not capricious. Au contraire! God was and is the great composer and conductor of the universe. God raised his holy baton (or if you prefer God raised HER holy baton) and had a creative thought. Then on the baton’s downstroke, stars and planets, sea and land, trees and plants, fish and birds, animals, and finally humans- - all of these came into being. God’s great symphony borne of one great thought, commenced- - a well-thought-out symphony that poets refer to as the music of the spheres.

God is reason, says Pope Benedict, and when we approach God, in worship, in prayer, so we also must be reasonable. Pope Benedict believes that religious reason is at its best when it is rooted in Greek philosophy. He says that is what makes the Roman Catholic brand of Christianity so,

well, so right. To quote Pope Benedict, “[in the Roman Catholic tradition there is a] profound encounter of faith and reasonan encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion. From the very heart of Christian faith, and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith, Manuel II was able to say: Not to act with logos [or reason] is contrary to God’s nature.”

Do you have a problem with that? I hope so. Benedict has jumped from God’s rationality to human rationality. It is part of classical theology certainly that humans are reasonable as God is reasonable. According to many classical theologians, when God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,” God meant “Let us make humankind rational just like the gods.” It sounds good, until you really consider how that idea plays out in society. For one thing, it puts a high price on intellectualism and at the same time devalues our physical nature, which we would all agree is a very important part of human life and identity. But, what really is off- putting to me about humans being reasonable in the image of God, and maybe it’s off putting to you too- - is that it is presumptive—as if it is possible for rational humans to tap into and understand the rational mind of God. Is that ever possible? Then, too, Pope Benedict equates reason with non- violence. It seems a given with him that reasonable people do not act violently. There are plenty of people in the world today who commit violent acts and call those acts reasonable. War is a case in point.

Here I want to pause for a minute in our discussion of Pope Benedict’s speech to talk about what it means to be created in God’s image. Theologians have probably spent as much time trying to understand what it means to be created in God’s image, as they have about trying to understand “In the beginning was the Word.” One understanding that has gotten us into a lot of trouble is that we are created in God’s image in that like God we have dominion over creation. That understanding has given us license to consume and abuse willy- nilly our planet’s resources.

How else might it be that we are like God other than as rational beings or as beings who have dominion over creation? The understanding that THIS theologian prefers to embrace is this, and I didn’t make this up. It’s in seminary text books: Humans are created in God’s image in that, like God, humans desire relationship. Let me say that again. Humans are created in God’s image in that, like God, humans desire relationship.

There is Biblical support for that understanding. In Genesis, right after the part about God creating humans in God’s image, there follows the line about “male and female he created them.” And there is that amazing line also in the Book of John, “God is love.” Just as God desired loving relationship and so created life, including human life, so too, humans are

created with a desire for loving relationship with each other and with God. Think about that. It just may be that our desire for loving relationship is in the clay from which we were fashioned and in the soul God breathed into us at creation. Perhaps it is love, not reason, then, on which we need to pin our hopes if we intend to make this world less violent.

That said, let us return to our passage for today and also Pope Benedict's speech. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Maybe, just maybe, John was not talking about Reason at all, despite what Pope Benedict says. Maybe John really meant us to read the passage as I just read it to you. "In the beginning was the Word." We're back where we began. What does that mean? One interpretation that has REAL possibilities for us, I think, comes not from our study of Christianity at all but, believe it or not, from our study of Islam. There is a certain poetry in that, don't you think? - - that our understanding of Islam may help us understand better our own faith? As you may or may not know, in November, some of us at Cove engaged in a brief study of Islam. One piece of information that we took away from that study was that in the Islamic tradition the Qu'ran is the Muslim's Holy Book, but not necessarily in the same way that the Bible is our holy book. Many, probably MOST Christians believe that the Bible is the INSPIRED, as opposed to the INERRANT Word of God. We learned in our study that most Muslims believe that the Qu'ran is THE ABSOLUTE INERRANT Word of God. It is for them the touchstone against which all their actions and beliefs, are judged. What is our touchstone? It is not a Word or Words at all. As we read in class, the Qu'ran is for Islam as Jesus Christ is for Christians. Jesus is our Word. Jesus Christ is our touchstone. HE is the one against whom all of OUR actions and beliefs are judged. We believe that Jesus is God's spoken word to us, delivered to the world at the beginning of creation and brought to earth in human form at Christmas. That, my friends, is why that passage is part of our lectionary for today—a week after Christmas. With the birth of Jesus, God's Word entered the world.

I am not absolutely positive, but I believe that is an idea that can be accepted by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. I'll run it by some of my Catholic friends and let you know. If it is so, then maybe there really are some things about which ALL Christians can still agree. Now if we can just find more areas of agreement between Christians and Muslims, the world truly would be less violent. Let us pray for peace in the year ahead. Amen

