

A Reality-Check

Psalm 73:21-28

Guest preacher - Dr. Richard J. Mouw, President, Fuller Theological Seminary

Sunday, June 4, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

It is both a personal delight and a great privilege to be with you this morning. This great congregation has done so much to serve our denomination, to serve this city and indeed the nation. We at Fuller Seminary feel a special bond with you and we are so proud of you and the members of the staff. This has been true throughout the years. It is truly a privilege to be here with you today.

And it is especially a privilege to open God's word with you today, Pentecost Sunday, the Sunday in which we celebrate the birth of the church of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We celebrate that wonderful event when the Apostles experienced the fulfillment of the promise that Jesus had given them not long before he went to the cross: after he would be resurrected and would ascend to heaven, he would send a Spirit to them who would minister to them in very special ways. And that Spirit then was given to the Church. We read in that great account of Pentecost in the book of Acts, that when the Holy Spirit came and the church was established, they devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching, and to fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

I want to emphasize, especially this morning, the importance of a Spirit-filled congregation—abiding by, and being faithful to, the teachings of the Apostles. The Holy Spirit came in power, but the power of the Holy Spirit cannot be separated by the fact that he is also the Spirit of truth. We desperately today need the Spirit of truth in our midst... in our nation... in our denomination... and in our congregations. Because not only is there a Spirit of truth in the world but there is also a spirit of falsehood at work. Satan has sent his spirits into the world, so we are surrounded by spirits of falsehood. When we come to church, it's important that we experience the truth of God's message to us. Of course the Holy Spirit was there all along, as he was in the Old Testament. But he came at Pentecost with a new measure of his presence and power. The presence of the Holy Spirit was mentioned in the Old Testament; for example, in Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right Spirit in me. Do not cast me away from your presence. Do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit."

The Psalmist, like many of us, is very aware that the spirits of falsehood are surrounding us in our world. Like the message to us this morning from Psalm 73; the beginning of the verse is that: my soul, at one point, had become embittered. 'I was pricked and hardened, and I became like a stupid and ignorant beast before you, O God.' Earlier on in the Psalm, he described how that happened. He said he came to a point where his 'feet had nearly stumbled and he had almost lost his step because he was envious and arrogant; he saw the prosperity of the wicked, for they had no pain.' He was watching re-runs of Baywatch; and he said: 'they have no pain, for their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are and they are not plagued like other people.' Watching The Sopranos, he said: 'their pride was their necklace and their violence covered them like a garment; their eyes swell out with fatness, and their hearts overflow with follies, and they scoff and speak with malice.' Having heard Howard Stern on the radio, he said: 'they set their mouths against heaven and their tongues range over the earth. And then people praise them for this. They don't see any faults with these people.' And then he says: 'such are the wicked; always at ease. They increase in riches.' And then he says, 'in vain have I kept my heart. I want to be like those folks. That's the life I want to live.' And then he says, 'If I had gone on this way much longer, I would have been untrue to the circle of your children. But when I thought about how to understand all of this, it seemed to me a wearisome task.' And then this awesome line: "until I went into the sanctuary of the Lord."

He went to church and he got a reality-check, because his definitions of reality had been shaped and formed all week by the voices of the spirits of falsehood. Then he went to church, and he experienced that community in which God's Spirit renews us, and gives us a reality-check and leads us into church. Like the Psalmist, and like the early church that experienced the power of Pentecost, we need to be faithful to the Apostles' teaching and to the truth of God's word. We need to do that by constantly testing the spirits. It's a good thing that we are here this morning. Because this is a time when we can test those other spirits—having come into the sanctuary of the Lord, and experiencing the community of the Spirit of truth.

We need some guidelines to do that. Let me just mention three that are based on Psalm 73. The first is that the spirits of falsehood around us challenge God's authority. This is Satan's basic method: challenging the authority of God. I saw a movie back in 1967. I don't remember too many movies that I've seen 30 or 40 years ago but this one was memorable and it was called "Bedazzled." They did a re-make of it in 2000 but it's not nearly as good as the 1967 version. I have to be careful about what I say about the 2000 version because I was once in northern California and had a woman come up to me and say that she resented me putting down the 2000 version; she was in that film. I hope no one here this morning was in that version of "Bedazzled;" the 1967 version starred Dudley Moore and Peter Cook. Dudley Moore was this ne'er-do-well guy who worked in a London hole-in-the-wall hash house, and he was very much in love with a waitress who wouldn't give him any attention at all. The Devil was a customer played by Roger Moore. He would come in, and one day he heard Dudley Moore mumbling, "I'd do anything if she'd just show me some loving attention." So the Devil comes to the Dudley Moore character and says, "If you would sell me your soul, I will give you three wishes in return." Then the whole rest of the movie is about those wishes. And no matter how he puts it, it never seems to come out quite the way he wanted it to because the Devil even deceives him in those things.

But there is this wonderful moment in "Bedazzled" 1967 where the Peter Cook character and the Dudley Moore character are walking along a street in London. And Dudley Moore says to the Devil character, "What was it like when you were still up in heaven and how did you end up down here?" And the Devil says, "I'll show you." They come to a mailbox; he climbs up there on the mailbox and sits there with his arms and legs folded. And he says, "O.K. I'm God and you are me. And you just need to keep going around the mailbox, around my throne here and keep saying, 'You are the greatest power in the universe... all the power and authority are yours...and you are greatest being in the universe.' And Dudley Moore does that. He just circles the mailbox for about a minute saying, 'You are the greatest being in the universe...all hail to you.' And then he said, "I'm getting kind of tired of this, so why don't

you come down here and let me sit up there for a minute.” And the Devil says, “That’s what happened.”

That’s a profound theological point. Our first parents in Genesis 3 heard a command from God that they are not to eat from the fruit of that one tree. Then Satan comes to them in the form of a serpent and says to Eve, “Why don’t you eat that fruit?” And she says, “God says we can’t.” And he says, “Did God say that? Don’t believe him. If you eat of that fruit, you shall be as God. You can sit on the throne, make the rules, and run the show.” And they attempted to sit on that throne, and to find their own reality in the light of their own pretended divinity—and everything got messed up since then. Jesus came, and the Holy Spirit came, to reverse all of that, and to put us back into a restored relationship with God—when once again, we can glorify God and enjoy God forever.

The spirits of falsehood challenge God’s authority. The spirits of falsehood also promote God-dishonoring division and fragmentation. We had a talk today about multiculturalism and the need to promote multiculturalism. And that’s an important call. At Fuller Seminary, we have over 70 nations and people from all over the world; multiculturalism means a lot to us. But it’s very important, as we think about multiculturalism, to realize that there are two kinds of multiculturalism that exist in the world. One is the multiculturalism that is promoted by the spirits of falsehood. And that’s the multiculturalism of Babel—where God had to place some restrictions on human beings. And as a result of the Babel experience, there were barriers erected between peoples: linguistic barriers and ethnic barriers that made it impossible for them to understand and talk to each other; to work at cooperating with each other. Babel divides. Babel separates. Babel places us in hostile relationships.

But Pentecost was God’s reversal of Babel. Pentecost was a time, in that wonderful account in the book of Acts, when people who spoke many different languages said something very un-Babelish. They said to each other, after they heard Peter speak, “Did we not hear, all of us, in our own languages, the same message about the same God who sent the same Savior into the world?” Babel was reversed by Pentecost. Where Babel divides and separates and creates hostility, Pentecost brings us together in a new kind of community. It is important for us to know, on this Pentecost Sunday, that we are united with people from many tribes, tongues, and nations, who have been put together into a new kind of community, and that all of the other bloods that seek to divide us and define us, must be subordinated to the blood of Jesus Christ that has created us and made us into a new kind of community—a community of the Spirit, bearing witness to the Lamb, to the glory of God the Father.

Thirdly, the spirit of falsehood makes false promises to us. The Psalmist makes this very clear in verses 25 and 26, he says, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart forever.” Only God and the Spirit of God can fulfill the deepest longings of the human spirit.

When I first became President of Fuller Seminary, someone gave us a gift for a couple of years. It was a box at the Rose Bowl; we got to host people for all of the home games at U.C.L.A. and the Rose Bowl game. We also had an option to have that box for all special events at the Rose Bowl, which isn’t too far from the Seminary. I got a call one day from a couple of Presbyterian pastors who said to me, “We understand there is going to be a Rolling Stones concert. We’ve got a group of about eleven men who are studying the relationship of the Gospel to the popular culture and we’d like to go and think theologically about the Rolling Stones concert. And we’d like you to be our theological consultant on that occasion.” And they were willing to pay the extra amount to make it happen.

So then came the night when I sat with thirteen other Presbyterians in a box looking down over the crowd. The first hour was the Red Hot Chili Peppers, which wasn’t worth much. But after an hour, Mick Jagger and his crew came on, and it was an amazing dazzling display of technology—laser lighting and images, flashing on multiple screens, many Satanic images and semi-pornographic images. There was a multi-level stage and Mick Jagger must have run five miles that night, up-and-down the stage. It was a dazzling display. About an hour into it, one of the pastors turned to me and said, “Mr. President, there are 80,000 people here—more than would be in all the churches in Pasadena next Sunday. If you could say one thing to all of them, what would it be?” I was embarrassed; I didn’t know what I would say to them. And then the Stones came on with their signature piece, Satisfaction, and Mick Jagger, as you all know, gets it started: “When I’m driving in the car and that man comes on the radio and gives me useless information, and its supposed to fire my imagination, I can’t get no satisfaction.” And suddenly 80,000 people are chanting with Mick Jagger, “I can’t get no satisfaction. I can’t get no satisfaction.”

Then I had an inspiration. A couple of weeks before, I had spoken at the Crystal Cathedral and Ken Medema was there. Many of you know Ken and his music. He is blind; he listens to the speech then writes a piece about the speech and he performs it right after the speech is given. After my speech he did an interesting thing: with his right hand, he played honky-tonk music and with his left hand he belted out the slow and mournful tune of the Geneva version of Psalm 42. That’s a favorite Psalm in the Dutch community where we both were raised and it’s just a private joke between two Dutch boys: there was this honky-tonk—and then Psalm 42. That night as I heard that crowd in the Rose Bowl chanting, “I can’t get no satisfaction,” I heard, with the ears of faith, Ken Medema, pounding out Psalm 42, in distinct opposition to the song.

Then I knew what I’d say to address 80,000 people at the Rose Bowl: I’d tell them Jesus alone, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can satisfy their deepest longings of the human spirit. I’d tell them what the great philosopher Pascal said: that in each human heart there is God-sized vacuum that only a relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, can establish and fulfill. I would tell them what St. Augustine said, at the beginning of his Confessions: that “We’ve been created for you O Lord, and our hearts are restless until we rest in thee.” There is a restlessness out there. The spirits of falsehood are making false promises. But when we come to church, we realize this: that only God, in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can satisfy the deepest longings of the human spirit.

Happy Pentecost! Lord God, we give you praise that Jesus has come, that he has sent the Spirit, and that your Spirit alone can satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. Lord God, we pray, as we are in your house today, that we will experience the reality-check that points us to you, and you alone—as our Lord, and our King, and the source of the truth in our lives. We pray this in the strong name of Jesus, our Savior, Amen.