

Thoughts on Pastors, Preaching

The recent uproar over Barack Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, has been anything but edifying. A few seconds of sound bites, taken out of context by Faux News, hardly provide a sound basis for passing judgment on Wright's several decades of preaching and ministry. Even if what he said was outrageous, give the man a break – or at least don't blame Obama.

To be sure, what Wright said in those sound bites was provocative, and possibly troubling, especially to Americans who have yet to fathom the "long train of abuses" perpetrated by this nation on people of color since before its founding. When judged in context, however, Wright's words hardly seem outrageous at all.

It's sad that Obama felt the need to dissociate himself from what appear to me to be appropriately strong words of judgment regarding major moral failings of America. It's contemptible that Hillary Clinton exploited the opportunity to posture that she thought Obama should have left Wright's church. I have met and have read some of the writings of the pastor of the United Methodist church where Hillary and Bill attended when they lived in D.C., and though their pastor would doubtless have expressed himself in a different idiom, I doubt that he would find much in Wright's sermons with which to disagree.

Any preacher in the Christian tradition has, as a central task, to preach the Gospel. Rightly done, this will have two effects: It will comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.

Jeremiah Wright would not preach the same sermon to a different congregation, and it's hardly fair to judge his or any other preacher's words disregarding the context in which they are delivered. Words that comfort in one context may afflict in another, and vice versa. Nor is it fair to judge any preacher's words by criteria that have nothing to do with their truthfulness as Gospel proclamation. Preachers have an obligation to speak truthfully about all things and under all circumstances -- winsomely when possible. But they have no obligation to speak ingratiatingly, obsequiously, platitudinously, or with false patriotism.

Any preacher who has never had a parishioner come to him or her after a sermon seeking solace, support, and counsel is surely not doing a proper job. Likewise, any preacher who has never had someone walk out during, or protest after, a sermon must be withholding some important truths from his or her congregation.

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