

Certainty, Accuracy and Seeking to Follow Jesus

Recently on National Public Radio's Weekend Edition, sports commentator Tim Goldman mentioned a study done at Washington State University. Those who conducted it found that a sports pundit's Twitter following increased much more if the pundit used "confidence words" like "vanquish" or "destroy" or "annihilate" when making predictions about the outcome of games. The percentage increase in followers was much smaller if the pundit was merely accurate. Goldman concluded, "We want certainty more than accuracy." Maybe he should have said, "We mistake certainty for accuracy."

It is not only with sports pundits that those who boldly bluster and use an abundance of "confidence words" draw a significant following. It is the same with political pundits. The ones who are the most thoughtful, circumspect and open to reason are not the ones who grow a huge fan base. Rather the ones who speak with the greatest degree of certainty, thundering condemnations on those who disagree with them, are the ones that tend to have the largest audiences. But what they have in certainty, they lack in accuracy. But their fans are so enamored by the pundits' confidence, they somehow fail to see that lack.

Clearly, religion is not exempt from this phenomenon. Certainty, regardless of how ill-founded, can draw crowds, especially if it is presented with dramatic flair and supported by a top-flight musical program. I cringe at some of what I hear coming from pulpits of megachurches. Not just individual congregations, but denominations that throw about "confidence words" as their message is proclaimed with absolute certainty, and have little good to say about any other faith, often are the fastest growing ones. Currently the Seventh Day Adventists and the Mormons are among the fastest growing denominations. In the not so distant past the Church of Christ held the record. None of these groups have a name for being open-minded or ecumenical.

I cannot help but recall the words of William Butler Yeats poem "The Second Coming":

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

It seems to me that far too often it is in fact the case that "the worst are full of passionate intensity." But it is also my belief that this passion is what the apostle Paul once called "zeal... but not according to knowledge" (Romans 10:2 KJV). I certainly don't want to dismiss all passion as misguided. But we shouldn't mistake flaming hot certainty for accuracy or truth. Someone can use all the "confidence words" in the world and still be harmfully wrong.

I sometimes do fear, as Yeats wrote, "The best lack all conviction." Perhaps they don't lack "all conviction," but they don't have enough of it to step into the fray when they really need to do so. While over-blown certainty that leaves no room for the reevaluation of convictions is dangerous –especially among people who are willing to use violence to advance their views- it is also true that paralyzing uncertainty is unhelpful. Scripture tells us, "we know only in part" (1 Corinthians 13:9). For that very reason, it is important that we always be ready to learn more and willing to reassess things we had thought were true. But that doesn't mean we are to be forever tentative about everything. It doesn't mean we are to passively allow the world to be over-run by those driven by a "passionate intensity" that allows them to trample over those who disagree with them and to dismiss the needs of those who are the most vulnerable. I believe we need conviction, not based on an ideology or a creed, but on the person of Jesus Christ. It is not so much *in what* we believe that we need confidence but *in whom* we believe.

Confidence and conviction that rests solidly on Jesus Christ as the Gospels present him leads us to hold that love -nonviolent, boundary-crossing, barrier-leaping love- is at the heart of what we believe and who we are. What we see in the story of Jesus determines how we define and practice love. We accept the love of God through Jesus Christ with thanks. Then we embody that love, standing against all ways that are harsh, insensitive, excluding, and that advance the interests of the few against the many, the strong against the weak, "us" against "them." We hold convictions that guide us to do unto other as we would have them do unto us (Luke 6:31) and love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31) and love others as Christ loved (John 15:12). All else is secondary but our love for God.

We may not be certain about a lot of other things. Those of "passionate intensity" who convey certainty and falsely claim accuracy may draw bigger crowds. But nothing is more important than seeking to simply follow Jesus.