

June 3, 2007

Psalm 8; John 16:12-15

Sermon: “Does God Play ‘Bait and Switch?’” Rev. Bob Jack

Text: *“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”*

I’m sure we’ve all been victims of a “bait and switch” scam at some point in our lives. That’s where a retail store advertises a product at a price that seems too good to be true, or maybe it says that it has a certain product that’s hard to come by, that you can’t find anywhere else, and when you go to the store you find out that that product’s sold out but the store would be happy to sell you another product just like it for a higher price. Bait and switch.

In the retail industry there are laws against such things, because it is unethical to promise one thing and to deliver another. But what if the intent of “bait and switch” is not to deceive you into spending your money on something else, but simply to get give your attention, your time and attention to something that may be of benefit to you, spiritually? Would that be unethical?

Donald Macleod, who taught us preaching at Princeton Seminary, used to lay great stock in sermon titles. In fact, he used

to say (by way of example to make his point) that if you were riding the Fifth Avenue bus in NYC, and passing by Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, the title of the sermon ought to cause you to get off the bus and go to church there.

Now that might be a slight exaggeration, but you get the point. So, once upon a time I was doing a sermon series on personal and family matters, and I announced that my sermon for the following week would be on “Sex for Christians.” After church that morning, Miss Mattie came up to me and said, “Honey, wild horses couldn’t keep me from hearing that sermon. I’ll see you next week.”

And, of course, what I preached on was what the Bible says about the relationship between the sexes. But some folks said they wanted to come just because that was the first time they ever heard the word “sex” used in the pulpit.

On another occasion I was preaching on the Trinity. I got together all my books on the topic, and prepared to show this church all the really neat things I had learned at seminary about

one of the most difficult doctrines of the church, at least, difficult for you and me to understand.

I told the church, “Look, just because it’s a beautiful Sunday in June, don’t go thinking that I should cut you some slack, and let you off the hook with a brief message about “peace, love, and happiness.” No, this is Trinity Sunday so you can forget about that. We’re going to look at the doctrine of the Trinity, flex our theological muscles, so brace yourselves because this may take a while.”

After the service was over, and I was greeting people at the door, one of our newer members said, “You know, Bob, I’ve been a Christian 30 years and that’s the first sermon I’ve ever heard on the Trinity. Do you preacher-types just sort of keep this heavy stuff hidden away in the closet until after we’ve signed on the dotted line and paid our initiation fees?”

‘Course not. But it got me thinking about Jesus. Because in a way that’s what Jesus says that he’s doing with his disciples, in this section of John’s Gospel where he’s bidding them farewell.

For many long passages Jesus has been explaining his mission to his followers. He's used a rich array of images, delved into a number of heavy ideas. He's leaving them, he says, and before he goes he lays down some of the most impressive teaching in all of the Bible.

Then, in the middle of this long dissertation, Jesus says that he has lots more to tell them, but he won't (16:12). There are things about who he is and what he's about that he can't share with them because they can't bear to hear it. So Jesus is going to save that all for later. Later, he says, the Holy Spirit will open that truth to them in such a way that they can understand it.

That's an odd thing for Jesus to say, isn't it? Considering all those times in the Bible where Jesus tells his disciples that he's "made known everything" that can be known about God (15:15). John draws us a picture of Jesus as the full, complete revelation of God. In other words, when you look at Jesus you see as much of God as there is to see.

Or do we? Do we have all the words about Jesus, all the ideas about God, all there is to know about the Holy Spirit? Or are we supposed to expect something more? Jesus says that there are things about him that the disciples “cannot bear” at the moment. What do you think he means by that?

Some people say that what he meant was that they couldn't bear to know what he would have to go through on the cross with his suffering and death. But eventually, when all that was over, then they will understand the depth of his love, which could only be accomplished through dying on the cross. And there's something to this interpretation of Jesus' words.

But other people say that what Jesus meant was that his revelation is a continuing process, an ongoing process that continues even after the New Testament is closed. “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”

Only after the Holy Spirit comes in full force, as Jesus promised – the “Spirit of truth” – only then can you and I and disciples everywhere understand the full force of Jesus' promises.

The Spirit will guide us into all truth, and will continue to guide us all our life long. The Spirit comes, my friends, not to tell us something secret that hasn't been known up until now. The Spirit comes to unpack and unfold and disclose and reveal more about Jesus in our day to day living.

Karl Barth, the great theologian of the last century, once warned that there is no such thing as a “professional” Christian. And I think what he was saying was you and I need to always guard against temptation, the lie, that at some point we have arrived, and that there's nothing more about our faith to be learned, no more growing and converting for us to do, as if the Holy Spirit has nothing further to teach us about God.

In a sense, we're all just beginners. I don't care how long you've been at this thing called faith – and I include myself in this – we're all just beginners. We're amateurs.

If you look in your Bibles to the Book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, you'll find that the oldest name for being a Christian

is “member of The Way.” To be a Christian means to be part of “The Way,” that is, on the way with Jesus.

And along the way, the Holy Spirit gets real busy with our lives, unfolding more and more of the mystery of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. There are things about our faith that God could not lay on you during your early years as a Christian. You couldn’t “bear them,” to use Jesus’ very words. That’s why we have to worship week in and week out, 52 weeks of the year, all out life long, so we can gradually, eagerly, let the Spirit of truth work on you the wonderful new insights and mysteries and revelation of what God has in store for your life.

So, one of you comes up to me after worship, and you say, “Where on earth did you get idea? I’ve been in church all my life and I’ve never heard that before!” And what I should say is, “Congratulations! You’re living proof of John 16:13. The Spirit of truth is working on you, don’t you see it? God is not done with you yet.”

Thank God we don't have to figure out everything about Christian faith before we begin our journey. Otherwise, we'd never get started. That's because being a Christian is not a *technical* discipline, like engineering or medicine or law. It's a *life* discipline. It's not a question of cramming your head full of every known fact in a particular field of study, so you can take a final exam and demonstrate how smart you are. It's about letting God take hold of you, in all your ignorance and naiveté, and letting God begin to work on you, spiritually, for the rest of your life.

The apostle Paul says to one of his churches that, when he first taught them, he had to feed them baby food – soft, easy to chew, appealing vittles – before he even dared to give them the “meat” of the gospel.

The Spirit of truth is like that. So don't be surprised when you go through growing pains with your faith. Don't feel bad when you come across things you've never known before. The Spirit of truth knows enough about Jesus, and about you, to reveal just what you need to know, and when you need to know it. The Spirit of

truth knows enough about you not to tell you more than you can bear at any given moment.

One of the members of this church went on The Walk to Emmaus a few years ago. And she said to me, after the weekend was over, that she had just discovered what it meant to read and study the Bible. That seems a rather odd thing for someone to say after being a Christian all her life. Yet, what it meant for her was that it took 40-plus years for her to discover how vital Bible study is to developing a deeper relationship with Jesus.

She began reading the Old Testament, especially, and she heard it as if for the first time. It was calling out her name, laying hold of her life, embracing her, showing things about God that she had never seen before. It wasn't that she had never read the Bible before that time – of course she had. It was just that her appreciation for, and her application of the Bible, was new. Brand new.

See what I'm saying? Jesus was telling us the truth when he said that he wouldn't lay any more truth on us than we can bear.

He would wait, until just the right time for the Spirit of truth to tell us the truth.