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HOLY MAN

BY DAVID SMITH

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

—Hebrews 12:14

To be greatly and effectively wicked a man needs some virtue.

—C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

Dances With Wolves is one of my favorite movies. In it, a disillusioned Civil War soldier, John Dunbar (played by Kevin Costner), earns a transfer of duty to the rapidly vanishing Western frontier. Dunbar encounters a tribe of Sioux Indians; he eventually converts to Sioux ways and is assimilated into the tribe. His conversion is summed up in the name of the movie, John Dunbar's name in the Sioux language—*Dances With Wolves*.

One of Dunbar's first encounters with the Sioux involves his meeting with two men of the tribe. One of them, Wind in His Hair, is a fierce warrior. The other, Kicking Bird, is a man who makes a tremendous impression on Dunbar. Reflecting on this first meeting with Kicking Bird, Dunbar writes in his journal: "I like the quiet one immensely. He's been patient and inquisitive. He seems eager to communicate. I would conclude that he is a man of some weight among his people." Later, Dunbar is able to meet Kicking Bird once more. In this scene, Dunbar inquires as to Kicking Bird's place in the tribe, and only then does he learn that Kicking Bird is the tribe's "holy man."

We preachers are "holy men"—persons who carry "some weight" among our people. That weight comes in part, for better or for worse, from the position we hold among our people. But it is our posture as people of God, not our position, that must be the real substance of our role among God's people. How we practice what we preach forms the bulk of our ministry.

And yet, as Eugene Peterson has put it, "The religious leader is the most untrustworthy of leaders: in no other station do we have so many opportunities for pride, for covetousness, for lust, or so many excellent disguises at hand to keep such ignobility from being found out and called to account."¹

People are longing to see someone show them, rather than tell them, the gospel. And the preaching we do with our lives is, more frequently than we care to admit, what opens or closes the door to the message that we share. Ministers need to be reminded that people watch preachers—very carefully. And what they're looking for is continuity between the messenger and the message. Indeed, the matters that cause people to sit up, take notice, and give a hearing to the good news are the matters most often challenged in ministers' lives today.

Remember John Dunbar's observation of Kicking Bird? "I like the quiet one immensely. He's been patient and inquisitive. He seems eager to communicate. I would conclude that he is a man of some weight among his people." What impresses Dunbar about this holy man is that he is quiet, patient, inquisitive, and eager to communicate—the qualities most often lacking in ministers' lives, the qualities people are desperate to see lived out before them.

Quiet

People are bombarded with information. What is missing is quiet. A quiet someone. A quiet someone who is there, not so much to tell them something else they need to know, but someone who is willing to listen as well as speak—perhaps much more of the former than the latter.

I know this, but quiet does not come naturally to me. As a preaching minister, I am accustomed to speaking—at length! As an "answer man," I am accustomed to fielding people's questions. As a person, I'm usually not at a loss for words. Speaking is my job; speaking is in my genes.

But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has observed in his work *Life Together*:

[H]e who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too.... Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by the One who is Himself the great listener and whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.²

We ministers must learn to be quiet if we are to be holy. Quiet before others. Quiet before God. And I must ask—If quiet is a part of holiness, then what are you and I doing deliberately to build more quiet into our lives so that, if for no other reason, God might be heard through us? "We should listen to God at least thirty minutes a day—except, of course, when we are very busy. Then we should make it an hour."³

Patient

Is that a word? In our culture? My life as a father, husband, minister, and Christian is, in a word, busy. No—hectic. Hurried. Hyper. I do not wait well. I want things done, and done now, and done right—or get out of the way and let me do it. Quickly. Before it's too late.

As a minister, all too often I substitute “hyper” for “holy.” Whom shall I blame? My people? Somewhat. It was J. I. Packer who recently asked, “What do we as Christians chiefly value in our leaders?... The answer seems to be not their holiness, but their gifts and skills and resources.... The thought that only holy people are likely to be spiritually useful does not loom large in our minds.”

But ultimately, I have only myself to blame. I am busy because being busy is easier than being holy. It is easier for me to shape things than to wait on the Lord. Being busy gets me accolades from fellow leaders who are workaholics and gains sympathy from those who pity “the poor preacher” who works so tirelessly for them. A compliment can carry me a long way—and sympathy can carry me almost as far.

Hyperactivity gets in the way of holiness; it blocks out the Son's light and puts the spotlight on what I do. When I cannot be patient, I have made myself the Messiah and dethroned the One who has been raised to be both Lord and Christ (Messiah).

And I know I am not alone in this temptation. As P. T. Forsyth once put it: “It is so easy to do Christian work, and so hard to pray.... It is not hard to be devotional, but it is hard to pray.... Men may even take up Christian work to evade the arduous toil of spiritual concentration.”

If I am to be holy, I must concentrate on, and cultivate, patience.

Inquisitive

Inquisitive not of the biblical text alone. Not of principles alone. Not of more knowledge. No, what I need in terms of holiness is an inquisitiveness into the hearts and lives of people. People were not made for the message, but the message, for people. What kind of people am I bringing the message to? And what message am I bringing them if I am not learning them? Knowing my people is holy work. Getting into the lives of my people—inquiring—is part and parcel of my sermon preparation—or else it is not a sermon but a mere lecture.

People are made impersonal by so much in our culture. Dehumanized. Numbers. Faces in the crowd. The expressions we have to describe the problem are numerous. The solution is singular. Holy. Simple, and yet profound: someone who cares enough to inquire.

Eager to Communicate

Communicate? No, not as in speaking, but as in relationship. As in “to understand and to be understood.” Or, in the words of Eugene Peterson, “Our primary task, the pastor's primary task, is not communication, but communion.”⁴

But as a holy minister of God, with whom am I communing? That is to ask, whom am I willing to understand? Am I willing to understand only those most like me? Too often, I know, that is the case. How hard it is for me to grasp, to imagine, to experience, to live what Jesus lived! Says Rebecca Pippert: “In Jesus' case, we have the story of the holiest man who ever lived, and yet it was the prostitutes and thieves who adored Him, and the religious who hated His guts.”

Prostitutes and thieves? Why, I'm too busy to be busy with them! I'm too harried to help those I already have; how can I extend a hand to those who are helpless? And what would there be about me that would attract them? Certainly not my quietness, patience, or inquisitiveness. Jesus alone can draw them to himself; am I willing to have a real relationship with others that they might build a relationship with Jesus?

How I must die, then, to what I am! How I must flee from the distinctions this world makes, what my brethren expect, and what I would cry out to be. Or, in the words of Helmut Thielicke, “Only he who dies and rises again with Christ can credibly bear witness to the death and resurrection of the Lord.”⁵

A “Holy Man's” Prayer

Lord, I am undone! May I be crucified and risen afresh, and may I not crucify you again! God, be merciful to me, a sinner. You alone are holy. Quiet you are. You listen to me whine, not merely speak. You are patient with me. You wait and no doubt wonder, “How long?... how long?” You need not learn of me—you know me thoroughly. But how you long for me to know you—truly know you. And you are eager to communicate with—commune with—me? Who am I to commune with? How proud I am, and yet, this thought alone humbles me: “You resist the proud and give grace to the humble.” Lord, make me more like you. Humble enough to stoop and kneel, to serve and love. Make my paths straight and holy. To your glory. Amen.

Conclusion

“Of all the trails of this life, there is one that matters most. It is the trail of a true human being.... I believe you are on this trail, and it is good to see.” So says Kicking Bird to Dances With Wolves as he observes how he has completely converted to the Sioux way of life. And by the end of the movie, when Kicking Bird and Dances With Wolves say their final good-byes, Kicking Bird’s thoughts are on the journey they have made together: “We’ve come far, you and me.” Dances With Wolves reassures Kicking Bird that his life has made a lifelong impression on him: “I will not forget you.”

As our people watch their “holy men,” they will not forget us—for better or for worse. May it be that our holy lives, led by the Holy Spirit, will assist them in the journey and help bring them far along the way, the trail of a true human being created in the image of God and conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

Do you ever say, “I am overwhelmed with astonishment to find that the Lord has converted souls through my poor ministry”? Mock humility! Your ministry is poor enough. Everybody knows that, and you ought to know it most of all; but, at the same time, is it any wonder that God, who said, “My word shall not return to me void,” has kept his promise?⁶

Suggested Resources

Books

Harrell, Pat. *For I Am Holy: Recovering Holiness in the Church*. Austin: Institute for Christian Studies, 1996.

Peterson, Eugene. *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.

Journal Articles

Galli, Mark. “Perils of the Professionally Holy.” *Leadership* 15, no. 1 (1994): 106–14.

Meador, Prentice Jr. “A Funny Thing Happened to My Devotional Life on the Way to the Pulpit.” *Leaven* 2, no. 4 (1994): 19–21.

Audiotapes

Cope, Mike. *The Minister’s Spiritual Life*. Malibu: Pepperdine University Bible Lectures, Men’s Fellowship Dinner, 1990.

Woodruff, Jim. *Being an Ethical Minister*. Abilene: ACU Ministers Workshop, 1989.

Videotapes

Dances With Wolves. TIG Productions. Orion Home Video, 1990.

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Notes

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 15.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 98.

³ Quoted in Timothy Jones, “The Moment That Matters,” *Leadership* 8, no. 3 (1987): 100.

⁴ Peterson, 192.

⁵ Quoted from Charles Spurgeon in Helmut Thielicke, *Encounter With Spurgeon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.