The Gospel Our Plumbline

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol7/iss1/5
(AUTHOR'S NOTE: The brief homily which follows was the core of a service of morning devotions prepared for the second day of the annual meeting of Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe, November 8, 1986. It is slightly edited for ease of understanding outside that context. Regular readers of OPREE will note the affinity of its plea to that expressed in another brief homily of this writer, which appeared in OPREE VI, 4 under the title: "The Things Which Make For Peace.")

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." - Matthew 7:1-5 (RSV)

During the phone call in which I was invited to prepare this service, the one who asked me remarked that he had been thinking about the tendency in the West to evaluate the life of the Church in socialist societies as if the life of the Church in our own society were the norm—the standard against which that "other" Christianity were to be measured. I agree that this tendency is present, is strong, and has probably been observed—perhaps even practiced at times?—by most of us here gathered.

Implicit or explicit, that tendency is discerned and challenged by the passage from Matthew's gospel read this morning: an indictment of self-righteousness; a call to humility. It is an aspect of the Word that must, I think, be repeatedly articulated as we walk—with our congregations, with our friends, even by ourselves—through the highly charged, intensely polarized field of church relations across the ideological bloc division.

Anton Ugolnik, a friend and a US Russian Orthodox lay theologian, once wrote an article for The Christian Century entitled, "The Godlessness Within: Stereotyping the Russians." At one point, he included a kind of secular litany of anti-Sovietism (not quoted verbatim here, but paraphrased from memory) which, in part, read thus:

"Guilty about Viet Nam? Just look at Afghanistan!
Bothered by FBI and CIA intrusion into private and organizational life here at home? Remember the KGB!

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Concerned about our poor and homeless? In the USSR, the housing is falling apart!

Upset about any flaw or failing of our system? Would you rather live in the Soviet Union?"

What's the point? I think it may be this. One of the central teachings of Jesus, and therefore of the Church that exists in his name, is, in the Biblical phrase, that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." And further, that in our striving to share with God the work of redemption—of which peacemaking is a part—we submit ourselves and our ways of life to the same standard we seek to apply to another. The temptation to evaluate ourselves in terms of our ideal, and our adversaries in terms of their practice, is nearly irresistible. It comes out in high scholarship as well as in popular culture. We each, I suspect, know it in our own hearts as well. It may even take the form of reversing Tony Ugolnik's litany:

Distressed by Afghanistan? That's nothing to Viet Nam!

So what if public housing construction in the East is shoddy? We have people sleeping on grates in the cities—freezing to death in the winter!

No matter in which order the litany is put, its terms do not cancel one another, and cannot be a valid method for securing peace of mind and heart.

To conclude, I would suggest that there is for Christian persons a norm for evaluating both church and societal life—in both "East" and "West." That norm is the witness of the gospel to the life that Jesus lived, the Way he taught, and the discernible practices of the community which gathered about him. Both teaching and community seem to manifest a will to serve, a will to love, an openness to the Spirit's leading—by the light of which neither repression of dissent nor the baptism of self-interest appears as righteous. The gospel gives us the standard and the means by which to measure all shortcomings. But our primary challenge—if not in strict sequence, then certainly in intensity of concern—is that we must fully perceive our own. Only then, I believe, in repentance and humility, and with the sense of needing to work at a common project, are we bid to raise our concerns and questions with brothers and sisters from different traditions and histories. All the time we do so, being as open to hear their word to us, as we are to deliver ours to them.

Thus, perhaps, will we rightly hear and practice the Word of the Lord. God lead us in this narrow Way!