

## **Preachers and Priests: A Sacred Reminder**

*Some say John was a Christian, some say John was a Jew,  
but I say John was a natural man, and he was a preacher too!*

In my earliest years as a pastor and preacher those words by folk singer Richard Dyer Bennett sank like good seed into the soil of my life. They were, and still are, a message on ministry that reverberates at the center of who I am. John was all the things those words convey, a Jew who became a believer, preparing the way for our Lord, the greatest among the prophets according to Jesus. Yet he never pretended to be more than he was as a human being, and as things turned out he bore in his own body the marks of his ministry.

In the turmoil of our times, there is a lot for all preachers and pastors to ponder in the model John became and remains to this day. I am not speaking first to ministers about forensics or questions that all too often frame our conversations as preachers and pastors—like whether to use the lectionary, how best to frame worship, organize the church, or meet the expectations of others in leadership style and sermonic form.

What I am pondering are questions of soul, of the heart we bring or fail to bring to our calling—our passion both for God on the one hand and for people everywhere on the other. Have I grasped sufficiently in my own life the glory of the whole Word of God I am called to proclaim? And am I seeing people, mirrored in God's image, as greater than they see themselves? Are my horizons ever growing and my concerns for myself diminishing? What will be left in the hearts

and minds of the people I have sought to serve when my days of serving are over?

Think beyond your particular setting and your schedule for a few moments. Lay aside all the programs and activities that so occupy your energy and mind..What matters most in the long run is not where you are in space and time, or even what you are doing, but who you are and how you see yourself ministering to people across the awesome gap there still is in this world between our Creator and his creation. Step off the treadmill of doing, and take a good long look at your soul.

I've spent a day as this is written doing so myself, in response to the challenge I received last night in discussing Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book, *A Day in the Life of Ivan Desinovich*, with a group of colleagues and friends from church. During our animated conversation reference was made to Solzhenitsyn's 1970 lecture on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, in which he said that there are essentially two kinds of artists in the world. Ask yourself in what follows from his text what kind of artist you are, for preaching and pastoring is also an art, no less than writing or doing anything else in this world, if Christ be our Lord. Read slowly and listen carefully, as he separates for us good artists from bad:

*One artist sees himself as the creator of an independent spiritual world; he hoists onto his shoulders the task of creating this world, of peopling it and of bearing the all-embracing responsibility for it; but he crumples beneath it, for a mortal genius is not capable of bearing such a burden. Just as man in general, having declared himself the center of existence, has not succeeded in creating a balanced spiritual system. And if misfortune overtakes him, he casts the blame upon the age-long disharmony of the world, upon the complexity of today's ruptured soul, or upon the stupidity of the public.*

*Another artist, recognizing a higher power above, gladly works as a humble apprentice beneath God's heaven; then, however, his responsibility for everything that is written or drawn, for the souls which perceive his work, is more exacting*

*than ever. But, in return, it is not he who has created this world, not he who directs it, there is no doubt as to its foundations; the artist has merely to be more keenly aware than others of the harmony of the world, of the beauty and ugliness of the human contribution to it, and to communicate this poignantly to his fellow-men. And in misfortune, and even at the depths of existence—in destitution, in prison, in sickness—his sense of stable harmony never deserts him.*

Solzhenitsyn later quotes Dostoevsky as saying on one occasion that “Beauty will save the world,” which seemed strange to him, mere words without meaning. But through the crucible of his own later sufferings in Soviet Labor Camps he began to understand that great art in any form—far from being contentious and divisive--has within it “its own verification”:

*...Conceptions which are devised or stretched do not stand being portrayed in images, they all come crashing down, appear sickly and pale, convince no one. But those works of art which have scooped up the truth and presented it to us as a living force—they take hold of us, compel us, and nobody ever, not even in ages to come, will appear to refute them.*

Another theme in Solzhenitsyn’s Nobel Lecture challenges the artist (read preacher) to keep remembering both the source of his or her gifts and the universal purposes for which they have been given. He wants no one to limit the artist’s (read preacher’s) freedom to hone and develop those God-given gifts as individuals. Yet he makes clear that focusing too much on the gifts is to forget their Giver and forsake their reason for being:

*After all, only in part do you develop your talent; the greater part of it is blown into you at birth as a finished product, and the gift of talent imposes responsibility on your free will. Let us assume that the artist does not OWE anybody anything; nevertheless, it is painful to see how, by retiring into your self-made worlds or the spaces of your subjective whims, you CAN surrender the real world into the hands of men who are mercenary, if not worthless, if not insane.*

The appeal here, to all of us gifted for the preaching and pastoral office is clearly to be what we are. Indeed, how can anyone be authentic unless they are what they are. Yet it is just as clearly to be that in the WORD, where the power is to become more than we are. That means, as anyone

knows who has studied the prophets, both speaking for God to the people and, no less passionately, pleading before God for the people. Preaching and pastoral care are not about us. They are about bringing God and people together. There can be no true artistry in either of them apart from pain, the literal bearing of burdens with God and for God worldwide. And in that bearing there is no hiding from our own part as sinners in the brokenness of life. Henri Nouwen said it well, calling us “wounded healers.” We have no power in ourselves—sinful and self-serving as we are. Yet, as Paul reminds us, even we can do all things through Christ Jesus our Lord.

*World Literature (read preaching) has in its power to help mankind in these troubled hours, to see itself as it really is, notwithstanding the indoctrinations of prejudiced people and parties. ... It has in its power to convey condensed experience from one land to another so that we might cease to be split and dazzled, that the different scales of values might be made to agree, and one nation learn correctly and concisely the true history of another with such strength of recognition and painful awareness as it had itself experienced the same, and thus might be spared from repeating the same cruel mistakes.*

*...Who, if not writers (read preachers) are to pass judgment—not only on their own unsuccessful governments (in some states this is the easiest way to earn one’s bread, the occupation of any man who is not lazy), but also on the people themselves, in their cowardly humiliation or self-satisfied weakness? Who is to pass judgment on the light-weight spirits of youth, and on the young pirates brandishing their knives?*

Thrown in recent days, weeks, and yes even months into a world-wide crisis of not only means but purpose, have we as God’s under-shepherds taken seriously enough the power of the preaching office given us by him, and the pastoral care he expects of us who have been ordained and commissioned to tend his flock? To be a good soldier of Jesus Christ is, as Solzhenitsyn said, to recognize in all our ministering “a higher power above,” and work gladly whenever and

wherever called upon “as a humble apprentice before God in heaven.” I’m afraid I have often failed to minister in that spirit, and am moved to confess so before all my brothers and sisters, as well as the Lord.

Yet the call persists, by God’s grace, and I long passionately, even at my age, to take it up again with fresh commitment to the unleashing of its power to perform whatever God wills--even through me. Knowing my foibles and limitations I yearn also for a whole new communal understanding among us as pastors and preachers that each of us is the poorer without all the others. I know that talent and training, while useful, are not the key. What matters finally is our faith in God and our willingness to let him use us wherever and however he chooses..

Let us live up to our calling and responsibilities as artists for the Lord. Ours is a high and holy office and it deserves our very best. So does God’s waiting world. Go out today and tomorrow with Solzhenitsyn’s gripping Christian charge to every artist, including the likes of us::

*Anyone who has once taken up the WORD can never again evade it; a writer is not the detached judge of his compatriots and contemporaries, he is an accomplice to all the evil committed in his native land or by his countrymen. And if the tanks of his fatherland have flooded the asphalt of a foreign capital with blood, then the brown spots have slapped against the face of the writer forever And if one fatal night they suffocated his sleeping, trusting Friend, then the palms of the writer bear the bruises from that rope. And if his young fellow citizens breezily declare the superiority of depravity over honest work, if they give themselves over to drugs or seize hostages, then their stink mingles with the breath of the writer.*

*Shall we have the temerity to declare that we are not responsible for the sores of the present-day world?*

