

The Gospel According to Peyton Manning Part II

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For those of you who were here or heard us through the broadcast this week, you know that I preached a sermon last week called *The Gospel According to Peyton Manning* in which I extolled the virtue and play of one Peyton Manning – quarterback of the Denver Broncos – the morning before his big Super Bowl game against the Seattle Seahawks. I lauded brother Manning for his ability to control the game, make snap decisions and move the offense without question down the field. I made a big to do about the leadership of this great quarterback who seemed always to have his team running like a well-oiled machine. I went almost as far as to suggest that brother Manning and his Broncos were destined to win the game. Then came the first snap and I knew I was in trouble. You knew I was in trouble. Many thanks to those of you who felt compelled to send me texts and emails wondering with glee how I was taking the game. You overwhelmed me with your empathy. Not. Could there, in fact, be a better way to dismantle an entire sermon than what happened before our very eyes last Sunday night? I sense there was a conspiracy. I have learned the hard way to never again prognosticate a sporting event in front of a congregation. Unless it's the University of Michigan – but I better not be talking about them right now either.

But now in a desperate attempt to snatch victory out of the hands of defeat I want to wonder with you about what the sporting world witnessed last Sunday night. What we saw was a great quarterback – and above that a great human being – struggle and suffer with the limits and conditions of being in the world. Sometimes, a lot of times – things don't go your way. The ball

bounces the other way. That despite the preparation, despite the raw ability, despite the brains – sometimes the forces overwhelm you. The other teams wins.

You remember just a couple weeks ago that cartoon I described with the dragon propped up against a tree. He is savoring his most recent meal which happens to be the medieval knight he has just bested. The dragon is using the knight's lance as an after-dinner tooth pick. Scattered all around are pieces of the knight's armor – breastplate, helmet, shield and all the rest. Beneath the scene there is the caption:

No matter how hard you work,

No matter how right you are,

Sometimes the dragon still wins.

None of us is immune to the limits and conditions of being human. Not even Peyton Manning – though it sure would have helped this preacher.

And maybe it helps to shed light on the next section of the Apostles Creed that is before us today – *conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate*. Now when it comes to the life of Jesus it is very interesting isn't it that the Creed has very little to say about Jesus. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are chock full of the life and ministry of Jesus. We hear Jesus preach. We watch Jesus heal. We listen to Jesus teach. We observe Jesus confronting the powers that be. Scores of chapters are given over to the sights, sounds and words of Jesus. And yet when it comes to the creed we hear nothing from Jesus. Not a word of his teaching. Not a comment on his healing. Not a mention of his parables and stories. Instead what we affirm in our creed is simply that this person Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and suffered under Pontius Pilate. If there is anything to be said about Jesus – this is what the creed thought to say – that the incarnate person of Jesus was conceived out of the Trinity – and at the same time he was born of a human woman. He is of God and he is of woman. He is the place

where the divine and the human come together. Jesus is where God truly touches our world. He doesn't just breeze past our world – he enters into our world. In his divinity he loses not his humanity and in his humanity he loses not his divinity. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He is the God-man. God participates with humanity as much as humanity participates with God. God gets down into the dust, mud and muck of human existence. And God allows himself to get dirty. And the result of God becoming human, the creed says, is that God suffers – he suffered under Pontius Pilate. It is enough to say about God in Jesus Christ, according to the Apostles Creed, simply to describe God's movement. God's action. Conceived. Born. Suffered.

So when the apostle Paul invited the Philippians into a new life of discipleship – he didn't think to quote some phrases of Jesus or stories of Jesus or teachings of Jesus – in fact, there is hardly a quote of Jesus found anywhere in Paul's letters – no what Paul does is that he simply describes the movement of Jesus – the action of Jesus:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

Who, though he was in the form of God,

Did not regard equality with

God

As something to be exploited,

But emptied himself,

Taking the form of a slave,

Being born in human

Likeness,

And being found in human

Form,

He humbled himself

And became obedient to the

Point of death –

Even death on a cross.

It is almost as if the teaching of the apostles is a teaching with the sound turned off. Yes, Jesus has important things to say – Yes, Jesus has great wisdom to convey – Yes, Jesus has wonderful stories to tell – but what lies at the core of it all – is the gesture and movement of God. It is all about the approach of God. It is all about the mission of Christ – and it is enough for us to turn down the sound and watch. And see this incredible God make his incredible move toward us. Conceived of the Holy Spirit – born of the Virgin Mary – and, as a result, suffers under Pontius Pilate.

You can in fact see it when Jesus comes face to face with Pilate himself. Already having been roughed up a bit the Roman guard – Jesus stands before Pilate and Pilate is trying to figure out what to do and so the two men talk and the topic turns to truth and Pilate asks Jesus, “What is truth?” And what does Jesus say? Nothing! Or as Frederick Buechner would put it – not nothing, but silence. And the silence is there for Pilate to watch with the sound off. This is truth, Pilate! You are looking at him. This is Messiah. God loving the world enough to be enfleshed and to suffer along with us. God loves the world enough to get in the muck. To take some shots. To suffer the slings and arrows. To get sacked behind the line. For to understand the world ... God must stand under the world. God must stand under even the likes of Pilate. Why even the likes of you and me.

But it’s not just that ... that the creed says. Because it is not just that God came to the world in Jesus, stood under the world in Jesus – it is that God lived in the world in Jesus. And when God lives in the world – God will do right in the world. It is the only thing God knows to do – to do right. But to do right in the world means that you suffer.

This is the truth, isn't it? To do right in the world is to suffer. To get involved with the world is to risk the push back of the world. To intercede is to ask for trouble. The attempt to do good is to risk that things will go bad.

We've all been there. We've all done that. No good deed goes unpunished.

Mark Twain said that, "Fewer things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example." So to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly doesn't mean you're immune from the world's attack – it likely means you're a target. "That's all we need in the world," people will say, "is another person trying to do the right thing! Some goody two shoes. Mind your own business. Butt out! Keep your nose out of it. Don't try to make it better – because you'll just make things worse."

But when we say that Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord – was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary and suffered under Pontius Pilate – what we're saying is that God says that it's worth it. That this is the truth. This is the way. This is the life. This is what it means to be godly and this is what it means to be human. To be like Christ is to be emptied. Taking the form of a servant. Becoming obedient. Suffering under Pontius Pilate or whoever else it is that doesn't want good to be done.

I love that story told about David Livingston. Someone had come across a picture of him that had him looking out over the African landscapes with his hand over his eyes, sun shining on his face. A visitor noticing the picture asked Livingston what was going through his mind in that moment. "Were you surveying the land and people around you and wondering what next could be done?" the visitor asked. "No," Livingston said, "the truth is it had been a really bad day – no one willing to do what needed to be done – and I was saying to anyone who was willing to listen, "I've had it up to here with you people."

We've been there. We've done that. No good deed goes unpunished. To care for the world is to suffer. To have it up to here.

I remember sitting next to a woman in a hospital who was in great pain. She was a day beyond surgery and it hurt a great deal. "I never knew it would hurt this much," she said. And she didn't look good. Except that you couldn't wipe the smile from her face. And you couldn't wipe the smile from her face – though she was pale as a ghost and tears streamed down her cheeks from the pain – because the doctors had just come in to tell her that her sister was doing well. The sister in the room down the hospital hall. The sister to whom she had just given her kidney. "I did what any sister would do," she said with a wince. And maybe so. But the truth is to be sister or to be brother, blood or otherwise... is to in some way suffer.

And maybe that's what Walt Whitman tried to tell us when in the throes of the Civil War when reports were coming to the comfort of his home in Washington, DC that men were suffering terribly at the front – he could bear it no more. So he went. He went to the field hospitals and made it his mission to comfort the sick and tend the wounds of the wounded. And as a result something happened to him. Said Whitman: "I did not ask the wounded man how he felt, I felt myself become the wounded man."

This is, isn't the good news – God doesn't ask the wounded world how it feels to be wounded. He enters the wounded world and becomes wounded himself. For this is what love does, you know.

Kent Keith, an activist of 50 years ago said it this way: "People are often unreasonable and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are honest, people may cheat you. Be honest anyway. If you find happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough. Give your best anyway. For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

For I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary and suffered under Pontius Pilate.