

I heard a couple of stories lately that I want to share with you.

The first one is set in 1936 on the campus of Davidson College. The principle actors in the drama were the family of the late Dr. Price Gwynn, II. I heard it from his son, Price III, who, incidentally was once our denomination's moderator.

When his father was a professor at Davidson College in the thirties, he made the acquaintance of a professor at Johnson C. Smith University who was African-American. They exchanged invitations to teach the other professor's classes. This was all well and good, it fell under the banner of academic exchange. Perhaps an eyebrow or two was raised, it was 1936, after all, but it went fairly smoothly.

It did not go so smoothly, however, when Dr. Gwynn invited this same professor to speak to a Friday evening meeting of the Philosophy Club. Dr. Gwynn, feeling that it would be discourteous to invite the professor to speak and then expect him to drive home at ten in the evening, extended also the invitation to stay the night, enjoy a hearty breakfast with the Gwynn family, and drive home the following morning.

It was 1936, and this was just not done. This happened a full generation before Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the freedom riders. African-Americans who worked in the home were not permitted to take their meals at the table with the family- they had to eat the meals that they had prepared in the kitchen or on the back porch. If they lived with the family, it was expected that their sleeping quarters were separate. Here Dr. Gwynn had invited an African-American man to sleep in the same quarters, use the same bathtub, and eat a meal prepared and served to him by a white woman.

It's hard to believe segregation ever seemed like a good idea, let alone an immutable reality, but such was the case.

The professor accepted the invitation and everything went as planned. A couple of members of the Philosophy club declined to join the gathering, probably out of fear. But, the professor lectured, stayed the night, ate breakfast and returned home.

The life of the Gwynn family did not, however, go on uninterrupted. The repercussions of this act of social disobedience were deep and wide. Word spread like ripples on the surface of a still pond. One old grand dame declared, "Surely Dr. Gwynn has taken leave of his senses."

Sunday afternoon, Dr. Gwynn and his son, Price, III took a walk together, and they talked.

"Your Mother has been frozen out. All but two of the faculty wives have stopped speaking to her. I'll be passed over for head of the department in a few years. Your sisters are young enough that they will be fine, but I wanted to see how you are doing."

"I'll have to fight," the younger Gwynn replied.

"I was afraid so" replied his father, "When?"

"It won't happen on School property- then the teachers have to break it up- it'll come later, after school."

"Then I'll come and walk home with you."

"I'd rather you didn't- it will just make it worse when it finally does happen."

They agreed, and the next day things went exactly as predicted. The younger Price Gwynn was taunted, challenged, and accepted a fight later that day.

You know what the scene looks like. A ring forms, and he took on the biggest kid in his grade. A couple of his friends hung around the outside of the ring to help him walk home. He says it was a good thing they did too, because the bully left him in the dust with a broken nose, bruised and bleeding. They took him, one on each side, and carried him home. His mother had been waiting and she ran out the door, let out a shriek and called the doctor. He came quickly, set his nose, patched him up and gave him something to help him sleep.

Later that night, he heard from down the hallway the sound of his parents arguing. His mother, the quintessential southern lady was speaking to his father in a tone of voice that he had never heard before. He crept down the hall to listen in.

“I don’t know what you are doing,” she said, “But it’s gotten your son half beaten to death, and I don’t know if you even care.”

He said his father replied in a voice that contained more anguish than he had ever heard, “I care so much I almost can’t stand it, but I’ve got to do what I believe.”

When actions have consequences, it’s tough to stick to what we believe, isn’t it?

We’ve just concluded the season of Christmastide. First we had advent, where we waited for the baby Jesus, then it was Christmas and he was born, and now on Epiphany, we celebrate the magi coming to the house where Jesus was. (They vacated the stable, apparently.)

We waited, dutifully, and yet it all seems remarkably the same. I’ll let you in on a secret... I was here for the four o’clock Christmas eve service, me and three hundred or so people – organized chaos – and if you looked closely in the manger up in the chancel... Jesus wasn’t *really* in there.

We were waiting for a baby who'd already been born.

Jesus is born, so we hear, but has much changed?

And we read he's going to come back, but the Bible tells us precious little about what that is going to look like. Will it be with clouds descending, as we sing? Its past performance indicates future results, some would say it will be as subtle as the first time.

This is not the lectionary reading for the day – I took the liberty of switching them around because today's reading was the slaughter of the innocents in Matthew and Rachel weeping for her children, who are no more. I couldn't bear to read that to you. We've done that too recently.

No, in light of the promises of Christmas and the lament of Newtown, and the unfinished business of every place in this world where justice goes unshared, I felt I needed to bring a different word from the Lord for today, because I think we all suspect that with Jesus born but not yet come again there is a bit of unfinished business remaining. And so I settled on this odd passage from Mark.

And in this passage of Mark we find answer to the unfinished business of Christmas.

Rather than lingering in the crèche with eight pound six ounce sweet baby Jesus, we instead encounter the adult Jesus who preaches the Kingdom of God to us and reminds us that waiting for Christ may lead us to the Cross with him. He reminds us that actions have consequences.

That's a central theme of Mark's gospel – that actions have consequences. Other Gospel accounts give us different perspectives about how and why Jesus must go to the cross, but Mark's account is pretty clear- the cross is the consequence of Jesus' kingdom preaching. And yet, Jesus is compelled to do what he believes.

I wonder sometimes if the compulsion to do what we believe is what it takes to put a real Christ back into the manger?

The season of waiting is over, done with, it's all over but the diet and exercise, but it still looks a lot like it did in November around the world, doesn't it? We're done waiting, right?

Right.

Mark never calls us to passive waiting. He believes the Kingdom preaching yields response which in turn yields consequences - the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is at hand, we are told - consequences.

Winston Churchill once notoriously said that his time was a time of consequence.

Are we living in a time of consequence? I think so.

One of the things I find most compelling about the way Mark tells the story – the reason Mark is my favorite Gospel is that the people who get that there will be consequences are, for the most part, nobodies. They are persons lacking even names- identified by words like “Syrophoenician Woman”, “Gerasene Demoniac”, “Sinner.”

They were persons bound together by a common experience of the Kingdom of God that compelled them henceforth to do what they believed.

The style of our Gospel lesson today is called “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic was a type of literature written around the time of Jesus to reassure an oppressed community. It's not so much a code language as it is an oblique look at the goings on of the world with picturesque ways of describing how the judge will come and make things right. We don't know exactly always what is meant, but the purpose of apocalyptic is reassurance.

During the oppression of the Israelites under the Romans when the Romans committed

such atrocities as sacrificing pigs on the altar of the Temple of Jerusalem and desecrating it before throwing that same Temple stone from stone until even the foundation lay exposed, surely those early Christians needed a word from beyond themselves, and it comes, then as now - Keep awake. Watch.

We too wait. Not as oppressed sojourners in a foreign land, but in some sense in the same way as the early church- we wait for one who has already come.

In the coming of Christ, God breaks into this world. With this inbreaking, our perception is changed.

If we believe in consequences, we cannot cling to the old.

It is as though our theology of scarcity has been yanked from our vice-grip and replaced instead with a theology of abundance – a different world, lived with God's consequences.

Grace flows freely in the Kingdom of God.

There is enough for all in the Kingdom of God.

And yet, in spite of our glimpse of the perfection of the Kingdom of God, we live our lives in between the already of Christ's birth, ministry, death and resurrection, and the not yet of the coming Kingdom of God.

And what we do, or don't do, is of consequence. What we do, or don't do, *matters*.

Let me tell you the other story. Oprah Winfrey told this story in one of the many acceptance speeches she made for one of the awards she has won. I probably won't get it right, so with apologies to Oprah, she related a story about her childhood holiday dinners. Her father owned a barbershop. Like most good barbershops, there were some perpetual loiterers- persons with nothing else to do, or nowhere else to go. This is not out of the ordinary for a small town barbershop. What was out of the ordinary was that Winfrey's

father would invite these men to join them to share the holiday meals together, making for some interesting holiday dinners. One Christmas, craving the normal, all-American holiday extravaganza, she confronted her father,

“Why do they have to be here- why do you invite them- why would they even come in the first place?”

“They want what we all want,” he replied.

“What, the glazed carrots?” she shook her head, not comprehending.

“No. They want to be fed.”

They want what we all want. They want to be fed.

In between the already and the not yet, when the world doesn’t seem to have quite gotten the message that Jesus is come, we all want the same thing, *to be fed*. In between the

already and the not yet, while we’re waiting for the kingdom of God, we need *to be fed*.

In between the already and the not yet, as long as there are people who are so compelled

that they must do what they believe- and here’s the real grace of God, even when there

are not such people, at this table, just like the never ending supply of the widow for

Elijah, there is always enough for those who need to be fed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.