

Truth and Consequences, Ministerially Speaking

John the Baptist, the New Testament tells us, had a penchant for saying what he thought; and what he thought was this: Herod the governor was violating the law of God by having his wife murdered and marrying her sister. This involves commandments number six, seven and 10.

Herod did not take kindly to this ministerial intrusion into his private life, so he arrested John, then had him beheaded, a gruesome tale immortalized in the Renaissance paintings by Fabritus and Reni. It is an extreme example of what happens when a man of God “quits preaching and goes to meddling,” as we Baptists sometimes say.

It is not always easy to know where that preaching-meddling line is, and preachers are not keen on the notion that other people have the right to draw the line. By “other people” I include deacons or bishops, sheriffs or judges, and government bureaucrats of all sizes and shapes.

A few years ago a minister in New York state used his Sunday morning pulpit to campaign for a particular candidate for public office. Word of that came to the government workers of the Internal Revenue Service and they promptly revoked the tax-exempt status of his church. That case went all the way to the Supreme Court. He lost.

Here is another example. Jerry Falwell is the television preacher in Virginia, well-known for his outspoken opposition to homosexuality. He rarely is at a loss for words and never seems to temper his comments to appease an audience.

Falwell broadcasts his services all over the world. Canada considers anti-homosexual rhetoric as a form of hate speech; which means Rev. Falwell edits his Canada-bound material so that it does not violate the broadcast regulations of

that country. He does not want to go to jail, let alone lose his head; in fact, he doesn't even want his preaching banned from the Canadian airwaves.

Now comes another case.

Seems Father Scott Mansfield, when conducting the funeral mass for Ben Martinez near Santa Fe, had some stern words for the dearly departed. He had been a lukewarm Catholic, the priest supposedly said, had been living in sin, and was therefore going straight to hell. Not to pass GO and not to collect \$200.

Whatever else he had, the priest apparently had what the Jews call chutzpah—nerve!

If in fact he actually said all that—and it appears that either a state or federal judge will decide whether he did—the minister and his boss are in a mess. The family of Mr. Martinez has filed a civil lawsuit naming both the priest and the diocese as defendants and requesting damages for pain and suffering (theirs, presumably, and not Ben's, for they are of the opinion that his post-mortem suffering is less than what the priest predicted).

There is a time and place, I suppose, to talk about sin and damnation. Jesus himself had a few choice words on these matters, but I doubt that a funeral is that time and place. I myself have officiated at funerals of people widely held to be scoundrels, but even such people have a few redeeming qualities that can be the focus of a eulogy.

Nevertheless, it reminds all of us preachers how precarious things are when we take it upon ourselves to speak our minds.

Just ask Amos. He was the Hebrew prophet living some 800 years before Jesus who confronted King Jeroboam about the lack of justice and equity in the land.

“Amos is conspiring against you,” Amaziah, priest at Bethel in the land of Israel, told the king. “The land is not able to bear all his words” (meaning, of course, that the preacher was meddling instead of preaching—that is, taking public issue with

the way the king was doing his business).

So the king sent Amaziah, who also served as his personal minister, to deliver a warning to the fearless prophet: “Go, prophet, flee to the land of Judah, earn your living there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel for it is the king’s sanctuary and a temple of the kingdom.”

Scripture does not record what became of Amos, except that he did not take kindly to royal interference with his prophetic ministry. He probably lost his job, his tax-exempt status, and his television contracts, if not his entire free-thinking, straight-talking head.

Which is one version of what we normally call a prophet’s reward.

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