

Festina Lente *(The Centered Christian)*

2nd in the series:

Christus Paradox: Oxymorons for Christian Living

*(Jesus) said to (the disciples),
“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”
And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.
(Mark 6:31-32)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, **September 17, 2017**
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Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

Today’s message is the second in a series of five titled *Christus Paradox*, pointing to Jesus Christ as the ultimate paradox, the Word made flesh. The paradox of Christ, though, hardly ends with the incarnation. Jesus often taught using paradox as a mechanism to invite deep reflection. “*Take my yoke upon you,*” he said, “*for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*” The coupling of opposites -- *easy yoke, light burden* – are oxymorons, no less than Jumbo Shrimp, Freezer Burn, Unbiased Opinion, Even Odds, Controlled Chaos, Sweet Sorrow.

The word oxymoron itself is an oxymoron, a hybrid whose two elements are derived from Latin – *oxus* meant *sharp* and *moron* meant *dull*. Oxymoron, then, means *Sharp Dullness*, and describes a figure of speech combining contradictory terms, not in a contest of opposites canceling one another out like two penalties on the same play on the gridiron erasing the play. No, but rather they are used in order to spark attention and invite reflection. And they are fun!

There’s the folksy quip from Dolly Parton, “*You’d be surprised how much it costs to look this cheap!*” Or think of Yogi Berra saying, “*A nickel ain’t worth a dime anymore.*” There’s a tombstone in Ireland that reads, “*Here lies the body of John Mound, lost at sea and never found.*” Or the mom telling her boys as they embarked on an adventure she disapproved of, “*Okay, but if you fall and break your legs, don’t come running to me!*” And what about Paul Harvey, who said, “*If there’s a 50-50 chance things can go wrong, nine times out of ten they will.*”

While oxymorons can be fun, this co-mingling of lexical opposites can be serious (how’s *Seriously Funny* for an oxymoron?), inviting reflection on deeper truths. Consider Jesus’ words, “*I am Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last . . . I died, and behold I am alive forevermore.*” We follow a teacher who taught with the paradox in order to highlight the mystery of faith, saying, “*the first shall be last and the last shall be first*” and “*the one who seeks his life will lose it and whoever loses it for my sake will find it.*”

I intend with *Christus Paradox* to focus on *Oxymorons for Christian Living*. Last Sunday’s inaugural message of the series -- *Footprints of an Unseen Hand* – spoke to the Christian

person's most fundamental characteristic – Faith in a God Who is more than a distant cosmic deity. I called it “*The Trusting Christian*” because of the Christian's belief that God loves ME, the individual, and has a plan for MY life. It's this truth that led me to open our worship with the hymn, “*Guide ME, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land.*”

Sometimes, though, seeking to walk in the path in which we feel God is leading us, we know ourselves to get out of balance. Our walk is unsteady, obstacles arising to divert us from the intended path. So, in this second message, *Festina Lente*, I want to talk about “*The Centered Christian.*”

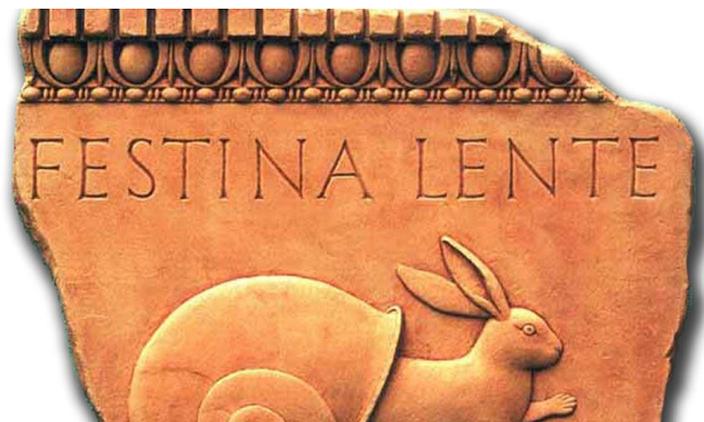
I chose Mark as our text this morning because, well, *Mark Moves*. Mark is the gospel most accurately described as the “*Action*” gospel. Unlike Matthew, for example, who organized his gospel around the five major discourses of Jesus (including the Sermon on the Mount taking up three full chapters), Mark focused on what Jesus was doing than what he was saying.

Other “slow” elements in Matthew and Luke are entirely missing in Mark. For example, Matthew opens with a genealogy linking Jesus to the Davidic line and reaching back to Abraham. Luke includes a genealogy stretching all the way to Adam! Mark has no time for genealogy, choosing instead to sprint out of the gate *immediately*. Our reading this morning scattered texts from Mark 1 - 5, noting that “*immediately*” is a favorite word of Mark. Mark is the fastest gospel, Jesus with frenetic, peripatetic pace. No wonder Mark is the shortest gospel!

Preparing pilgrims for our Holy Land trips, I often mention we will be “*running where Jesus walked,*” suggesting that the best way to prepare for the pace of our pilgrimage is to saturate oneself with Mark, this gospel of multi-tasking, Jesus rushing back and forth to keep the spinning plates from crashing to the ground. It's not unlike our pace in the Land with morning to evening fairly full. I smile and say, “*Less is more,*” but we rarely achieve it in our comings and goings from sacred sites.

Our text from Mark comes to us in the language of near exhaustion. The disciples had been sent two by two into the villages surrounding the Galilee and now, as Jesus gathers them back, he suggests for them a Sabbath-like break, “*Come to a deserted place by yourselves and rest a while.*” Jesus sensed the need for a re-energizing reprieve for his disciples, and for himself.

Which brings me to my title. *Festina Lente*, a Latin oxymoron meaning “*Hurry Slowly.*” Can you hear the distinctive pace of each of these words? To pronounce *Festina* slowly, lazily, would be to diminish the innate sense of this word which means “*Hurry!*” Do you hear the word *festival* in its core? One says *Festina*, thinking, “*Hurry – there's fun to be had!*”



Lente, on the other hand, means “*slowly*,” its pronunciation inviting slowness. One speaks the word *Lente* as if the word were dragging us into the forty days of . . . Lent. Forty is a numeric symbol of time in its slow and arduous passing. Forty days is Moses on the mountain. Forty years the children of Israel wander in the wilderness. Forty days Jesus is tempted in the Judean wilderness. The number forty invests Lent with a sense of slow passing, in no way wasted time, but rather worthwhile as a time of re-collection, of re-gathering, of centering us when, despite our best efforts to follow the footprints of God, our faith walk has become unsteady.

To play the linguistic philosopher, might it not be that the sound produced in our vocalization of the consonant “L” cues our brains to think of longness? L is a dental consonant, our tongue pressed against our upper dentals in a way that resists quick release, thus the prominence of the L in words such as *sLowLy*, the very translation of *Lente*. Let’s think of other L words -- Long, Lasting, Linger, Lease, Late, Labor, Labyrinth, Life, Love. Love may be born in a *Festina* moment, but only in Love’s Linger is its true vaLue appreciated.

Historians of ancient Rome tell us the phrase was a favorite of Caesar Augustus, something he said to his generals. “*Festina Lente*,” meaning, “*Urgency is required, but be sure your urgency is not thoughtless, but a careful urgency. In your hurry don’t make rash miscalculations. Hurry, but hurry slowly.*”

I find the phrase equally excellent as advice for our living. *Hurry* we know well, don’t we? Life can be filled with hurry, and perhaps never more so than in our Information Age. Fifty years ago we thought technology would create an Age of Convenience dramatically slowing our lives. The true effect has been the reverse. Technology has brought us, not *Lente*, but *Festina*!

*At this point in the sermon I pulled out my i-Phone, pretending to receive a text message, and said, “*Oh, goodness, please excuse me, for only a second, would you? It’s on vibrate so as not to bother you, but do you mind if I check who just texted me? I guess I’m proving right now in the pulpit the Facebook post I saw recently: ‘I’m inviting several friends over to my house so I can watch them play with their I-phones!’*”

An oxymoronic paradox of life in the Information Age is *Connected Disconnectedness*. By the way, the demonstration you just witnessed gives me an opportunity to share another oxymoron – what you just witnessed was a *Planned Accident*!

Connected we surely are, as never before; yet are we not awkwardly disconnected? We are present, not always where we are, and with whom we are, but somewhere else, with someone else, or many someone else’s residing far beyond the experience of the moment, thus diminishing our attention to the moment. In soul and spirit we can be jerked back and forth like Jesus in Mark.

If hurry is irreversibly a part of our living, how can we discover the secret of *Hurrying Slowly*? *Festina Lente*, I think, lies at the heart of God’s revelation to his people in the Hebrew bible. The fourth of the ten commandments offers Shabbat (the Sabbath) as a gift to the Hebrews. The fundamental lesson of the Sabbath is that in the midst of your hurried living, break the cycle with one day in seven. In the midst of your *Festina* week, find *Lente*. Don’t, on this day, seek More

of anything, but rather More of God. I love the Shabbat elevators one finds in Israel, which on the Sabbath stop at every floor up and down so that one need not push a button. Slowing down can be frustrating, but the message is clear, “*It’s the Sabbath. Don’t push so many buttons, don’t light so many fires. Just REST and know you’re along for the ride.*”



On Shabbat we are to recognize that our Call is to something higher than earning and amassing. As Wordsworth wrote, “*The world is too much with us, late and soon, getting and spending we lay waste our powers.*” Shabbat is a mechanism to recover those spiritual powers, through *Festina Lente* reminding us that life is more than a quest for earning and amassing, while our soul grows thin within.

For people of faith, a pathway to such Centering peace is to experience regularly the rituals of our faith. Weekly worship can be a *Lente* resting place for our souls from the hurry of our *Festina* living, the very rhythm of worship and liturgy inviting us into an Other place through the beauty and inspiration of music and praise, the slow pace of prayers, and the reading and contemplation of God’s words.

Jesus wanted his disciples to know what it is to be busy, to live the *Festina* life of hurry, but he also urged them to know when and how to say “No” as a path to value our soul’s deeper needs by saying “No” in the name of a higher “Yes.”

Rabbi Abraham Heschel points out that the first “*holy*” thing in all creation was not a people, a place, nor an object, but a sliver of time, one day out of seven. God made everything in the Genesis narrative and proclaimed it *tov* (meaning “*good*”). Not until the seventh day was anything declared *qadosh* (meaning “*Holy*”), and that holy something was the Seventh Day, Shabbat. Shabbat, then, is a cathedral in time, and we are invited into this cathedral every week of our lives – a spiritual *Lente* to slow our *Festina* lives, enabling us to Center and focus on God and on the bigger questions of our Being.

May you find Centering in your worship this morning.