3 Powerful Words We Rarely Hear from Preachers

There is something explicitly or implicitly understood that public personalities need to have an authoritative position on everything. I don’t understand this. Since I’m always learning and growing, I’m pretty sure I’m the smartest today I’ve ever been (which is not saying much). But part of the process of learning and growing is becoming painfully aware of how much you don’t know. For my part, I am increasingly comfortable in saying “I don’t know’ when” when I don’t know the answer to a thing.

I do not mean this is some sort of postmodern hazy way, as nobody can really know what to think about anything because there is no authority beyond my own account of my own story. Ther are plenty of things I feel that I know, plenty of things I think I can state with authority. But I don’t think you should trust anybody who speaks authoritatively about everything.

Some variation of the question of why God heals some and doesn’t heal others/ why God answers this prayer this way and doesn’t answer others comes up all the time. I believe that anything good God does to interrupt the course of history with His good future is a marker of what’s to come when creation is restored. But why this comes to some and not for others? I DON’Y KNOW.

I know that the full revelation of God is in the person of Jesus Christ, that what I see and hear of Him is the defining answer to the question of what God is like. But when I get to a strange text in the Old Testament that doesn’t correspond easily with my assumptions, I do not attempt to blunt the sharp edges of a narrative to fit my framework. I can say, “That text is weird to me. I’m not sure exactly what that means.”

Evangelical leaders get into interviews where they are treated like experts, and they are pitched a question about whether or not this candidate or that candidate is a proper Christian. What an easy, obvious opportunity to say “I don’t know ---- as if there is anything we can know with authority. It’s that we are not God and thus not in charge of who’s in and who’s out. But believing their own press, believing themselves to be “authorities,” they proceed to answer questions that cannot and should not be answered.

Tragedy strikes. Disaster befalls us. A child or a mother or a father dies unexpectedly. A bleak diagnosis is given. It seems it is time to speak of the unspeakable. In one of the most wrenching scenes in Scripture, Jesus’ friend Lazarus has died, and Jesus shows up four days later. All eyes are on the prophet-sage-master teacher, the wisest of the wise, awaiting a word that will heal, a word that will explain, a word that will comfort. If there is anything one could tightly expect from the man who delivered the Sermon on the Mount, it would be the gift of words.

And yet, with the weight of expectation towering over Him, those closest to Lazarus are given the gift of the wordlessness of God. The answer they were given is the contorted face of God, the hot tears of Jesus. There was nothing to be said. It was a time for grief, not for answers.

Yet, why is it as leaders we never seem to recognize the moment when there are no words to be said, no comfort to be offered, no solutions to be given? Sometimes the sacred thing, the --wise thing, the compassionate thing, the best thing, the anointed thing ----- is to shut up. And if there is an answer that is needed, let it be your tears or in your presence; let it be in the witness of a man or woman who has the courage and the wisdom to say, “I don’t know.” Some questions are not opportunities; they are temptations ---- temptations to play God, temptations to play the expert, temptations to play doctor, temptations to build the platform or the reputation. And if there is anything that would scare me. It would be to utter words in a scenario where God Himself would not dare to offer them.