

You and me against the world?

1 Timothy 2:1-7

September 19, 2010

You and me against the world. It's just you and me against the world.

Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like the world is going to hell in a handbasket? Do you ever feel like wherever you look there are people with lives spinning out of control, people who have lost their way, lost their values, lost their common sense?

Did you heard the story about the woman who was the victim of a vicious attack, horribly disfigured when another woman threw acid in her face? It turns out, she did it to herself! Why? What could possibly make someone do something so awful to herself just to get sympathy, just to get some attention?

Or remember the balloon boy hoax -- so many of us riveted to our TV's, worried about the fate of the little boy trapped in the sky in a runaway balloon? All a stunt. All a hoax. Done for the publicity.

Have you heard about the new movie, *I'm Still Here*, about the actor, Joaquin Phoenix? The film documents detail by ugly detail the course of his life over the last two years, a life literally coming apart at the seams, showing him as one reviewer put it "cavorting with prostitutes, viciously berating [his] assistants, taking copious amounts of drugs and rambling incoherently."

Apparently, this too was all a hoax, all an act. According to the film's director, this piece of performance art is the best work Joaquin has ever done. Really? This is good work? In what possible sense of the word could this be seen as something "good?" What good does this do for anybody? What's the point?

It's like someone defecating on a piece of canvas and calling it art. I agree with the reviewer who said that if it all proves to be a joke, "the joke isn't very funny ... in fact, it's kind of vile."

The sports world is in no better shape. This summer, we all witnessed -- whether we wanted to or not -- the great collapse of Tiger Woods, one more testimony to the corrupting power of money and fame and the folly of believing what everybody says about you. Lance Armstrong is being investigated, again, for doping. Reggie Bush had to give back his Heisman Trophy. And Derek Jeter -- Derek Jeter, the consummate professional -- Derek Jeter cheated.

Is this the world you look at every day?

A world where athletes cheat and behave badly?

A world where the entertainment industry appeals to our basest instincts, showcasing people lying, cheating, committing acts of horrible violence and meaningless sex?

A world where government doesn't seem to work, where politicians do little else than bash and slander each other, seeming to care little about truth or respect or dignity, only about winning, only about holding onto power, only about benefitting themselves and their friends?

A world where big business pretty much does whatever it wants and gets away with it?

A world where religion gets a bad name, not because of the accusations of its critics, but because of the behavior of its own adherents?

But it's not just the world "out there" that is in such a mess, but the world right here, close to home. The marriages and families of people we know and love are falling apart, almost casually, as if it's no big deal. Community institutions -- churches and service clubs and volunteer organizations -- are losing members, or finding that the members they do have are less involved, less committed, less reliable. More and more people seem to spend more and more time in the virtual world than the real world -- on Facebook, Youtube, texting, playing games -- paradoxically more connected with each other than ever before, but less in touch in tangible ways than ever before.

It's no wonder we feel like it's just you and me against the world!

That's how it was for the folks in the church in the Asian city of Ephesus. They were Christian believers in the midst of a pagan culture. They were a marginalized minority group, treated with indifference at best and outright hostility at worst. They had to live and work and survive among neighbors whose beliefs and values and behaviors were utterly different than their own.

What do you do in a situation like that?

You pull in. You pull back. You hunker down.

You keep your distance. You watch your step. You try not to make waves.

And you find your comfort, your identity, your home, among those who are like you, those who think and believe and act like you. It's you and me against world!

Timothy, Paul's friend and protege, was the pastor of that church in Ephesus. Paul wrote this letter to encourage him and counsel him in his work, warning him about false teachers and inappropriate behaviors. And he talked to him about how the church should relate to that hostile world around them.

"First of all," he wrote, "first of all, I urge that petitions, prayers, requests, and thanksgivings be offered to God for all people ..."

First of all, pray.

Pray, not just for each other, but for everybody.

Pray, not just for protection from the rulers and civil authorities who can do you harm and make your lives miserable, but pray for them. Pray for them, for the sake of peace, so that you will be able to pursue your lives without interference or opposition. But pray for them, too, for the sake of salvation, for their salvation, "because God wants everyone to be saved!"

God wants everyone to be saved, so Timothy must direct the church, not to retreat, but to engage.

Not to pull back into the safety net of each other's company, but to reach out to their neighbors.

Not to keep quiet, not to stay at a safe distance, not to do their best to stay out of trouble, but to bear witness publicly to what they know, to tell the story of the One who saved them, to proclaim the message of faith and truth for all to hear.

Their responsibility as Christians is not merely to keep safe the treasure that has been entrusted to them, but to share it, not merely to guard their own faith, but to use it and live it and tell about it, openly and boldly. They are called to be witnesses.

So, how do you think the church will respond to that news? How would you respond?

Be a witness? You must be kidding! I can't do that!

They won't listen to me. Nobody cares about what I think. And anyway, that's not my thing. It's not my place to be telling other people what to think and how to act.

I am not one to judge what other people do with their lives. My faith is a personal thing, something between me and my God, and their faith or lack of it is their business, something between them and their god.

This is the way so many of our churches have resolved the tension between themselves and that frightening, appalling, out of control world out there. We CUT -- "C" "U" "T" -- we become the Church of Universal Toleration! Our message to the world is ... whatever! Whatever you think, whatever you want, whatever you do, it's all OK by us. We CUT ... and run!

This kind of church doesn't make any waves. It doesn't cause any trouble. It doesn't provoke anybody, because it really doesn't do anything!

This kind of church remains disengaged, just as much as the church that withdraws into itself.

This kind of church may think it is loving the world, but it leaves the world it supposedly loves in just as much of a mess as it ever was.

God wants everyone to be saved! Not to be left alone, but to be saved! Because God loves the world and every person in it, God will not let any of them, any of us, rot in our own foolishness and rebellion.

So God calls the church to be a witness!

It is our job to be God's witnesses, not you and me against the world, but you and me for the world, you and me loving the world.

"There is one God," Paul writes, "and one who brings God and human beings together, the man Jesus Christ who gave himself to redeem the whole human race." This is the truth, that there is one God and one redeemer for the whole human race, not many gods or many redeemers.

Now some may think it rather presumptuous or arrogant to say that, but I think the opposite. When we say there is one God and one redeemer for all humanity, we do not put ourselves and our God above everybody else and their gods, precisely because it's not just our God!

When we say there is one God, we humble ourselves, recognizing that God doesn't belong just to us or to any other group that might make that claim. God belongs to all. All belong to God.

To say there is one God and one redeemer puts us in the same boat with everybody else. We are all companions on this journey, all brothers and sisters in one family, all depending on the one, the same God, for help and for salvation.

God wants everyone to be saved, so it's our job as those who have heard and believed the good news, not to timidly and selfishly repeat it to each other, but to shout it out loud for all to hear!

Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, God loves you. Jesus gave himself to redeem you. That's good news! Don't keep it to yourself!