

“The Misperceived God”
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Luke 15:11-32
March 31, 2019

Our Old Testament lesson this morning, among other things, speaks of business as usual. There is a time for this, a time for that. There is rhythm to life, a predictability to nature and to our daily rounds. And that, in a way, is a comfort, making life easier to take because we can expect and count on certain things, from the sun rising, to the laws of cause and effect. Existence seems a little more secure, time a bit more under control, and life has character, has structure, has (in more than a few ways) a certain dependability.

Contrast that Old Testament notion, if you will, with the following scripture passages: “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then know for a surety that the Kingdom of God is upon you!” Does anyone here know who said that? Or how about this: “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven!” You can almost hear the man shouting those words in great excitement.

Whoever uttered these words is trying to tell us that something unique and unprecedented has happened in our times, and can happen to us, too. Whoever heard these words the first time realized that winds of change were blowing, an excitement was stirring. Something different was going on. It was not the same old story; the predictability of Ecclesiastes was shattered.

What was it that had happened? In the language of the day, Jesus affirmed the coming upon us of the Kingdom of God. Now even if you and I aren't entirely clear as to what Jesus may have meant, exactly, by those words, there is no doubt that this was seen as an occasion of great joy. In fact, Jesus often referred to the coming Kingdom as a wedding feast. He stated that there would be no fasting while the party is going on. Think of it - when is the last time you ever referred to the presence of God in your life as being a party??!? Dare we think of it in those terms? Can we even begin to imagine it?

Details aside, Jesus was trying to draw attention to what might be called the ultimate act of God in our lives: offering us new possibilities, new ways of looking at our existence, new ways of living, new ways of loving.

To which most of the world has said: “So What?”

Many of us who call ourselves Christians, who have supposedly experienced the coming of God into the days of our lives, find that (most of our times) all is so drably familiar. Nothing really changes, or so it seems. No matter what the Bible has promised, we still hurt. We still hurt others. We are hurt by others. We still get sick. We fear. We know that we shall die. And all that raises the question, “Are the promises of Jesus empty and unreal? Does Ecclesiastes come closer to what we experience than the excitement of seeing things as Jesus sees them?”

We must face these questions honestly. Is there really any Good News? I need to know the answer to that question just as much as you do. What does it mean to say that something decisive has happened at Calvary? Who is this God, who, it is said, has broken into our lives, to change the drab and the dull routine of endless cycles, into something more eventful and worthwhile?

To help answer such questions, I would ask you to think about the story of the Prodigal Son. When we read our New Testament lesson this morning, I’m sure it was not the first time most of us had heard the tale; it is familiar to virtually all of us here. But let me point a few things out about this passage from Luke’s gospel.

The story is not about the Prodigal Son, but about his Father. And the fathers of today are but a pale imitation of the fathers of first century Palestine, where a father in his household was God’s representative on earth. He was the enforcer of rules, the upholder of correct behavior. And any father who acted like the father in Jesus’ story would have merited, at best, a contemptuous sneer by those who heard the words for the first time. Behaving as he did, the father of the Prodigal Son was disrespectful of his own position in society, was breaking the social fabric of the community, and was a corrupter of the

moral order. His reaction to his son's disgustingly self-centered and profligate behavior was more than indulgent in the eyes of his neighbors - it was dead wrong. And what is worse, the message of the story was that sonship did not depend upon what the boy did, but depended upon a fatherly love which never gives up. The father's behavior was unprecedented, unexpected, and grossly indefensible.

For Jesus, then, God is very different from the God most of us have grown up with. For the God of Jesus doesn't play by the "official" rules, is not limited by convention, and has no non-negotiable expectations on how we are to perform in our everyday lives. The God of Jesus is one who reigns in order to heal and to liberate, not to punish or hold us in contempt.

That explains why Jesus made it a point to spend his time with drunkards, prostitutes, and other low-lives. Jesus had no regard for what we see as the rules of the game. Think of it. What would you think if your pastor had breakfast every Tuesday morning at the local brothel instead of at the Colebrook Senior Center?

Jesus shows that living with his God allows us to do all sorts of things that it was unbelievable to even consider before. Now we can ignore that fact, and continue to live our lives as in Ecclesiastes - or we can perceive that some things have changed. God is not so much a God of rewards and punishments. That kind of God can make us prideful (assuming we can keep all the rules) or, if we fail (which is more likely, if we dare to be honest with ourselves), if we fail we live in fear of being unacceptable.

Jesus is pleading with us for a new vision of God, a new understanding. He says we have gotten God all wrong, and as a result, our lives are all wrong. For God is a God of love, not a God who is primarily concerned with assigning blame and meting out disciplinary penalties.

The question thus becomes, How do we change our idea of God, and in so doing, change ourselves? Jesus never said he would rescue us from the consequences of our mistakes, but he refused to believe that our mistakes define us. And so Jesus calls us to

repentance for our mistakes, and by that he means, in modern terms, of coming to our senses, obtaining a new sense of awareness, a new perception, by turning away from the misperceived God. And when we realize that God loves us not because of what we do, but because of something independent of our successes and failures as defined by society or the Church or whomever, then it will dawn on us that we can be freed from our anxieties about ourselves. And why is that important? As long as we are anxious about ourselves, we are focusing on ... ourselves. And if Christianity is about anything, it is the fact that the self is the wrong place to be obsessing over.

Think of the musician - instrumentalist, vocalist, whomever. Probably every musician, at the beginning of their career, is anxious about performing well, fretful of making mistakes, terrified of not being worthy of the music they wish to play or sing. But the great musicians move beyond that state, forgetting themselves in the beauty of the music and the composer's thought. Those musicians who do not make it to greatness - and I include myself among them - are hampered by the fact that we never get over our fears, and so end up thinking more about themselves than about the music itself.

That is no way to live a life, paralyzed by anxiety. That is what Jesus is trying to tell us. Don't be anxious about yourself; rather, rest in the knowledge that the power of God - which is love (nothing more, nothing less) - is all we need to see us through. There is no more business as usual, no more depending or relying upon yourself and what you can - or cannot - do. For now we would perceive that God's power is incredible love, freeing us from bondage to the old ways, from our guilts, and from our fears.

Let us pray: