

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 18, 2012
Lessons: Isaiah 43:14-19; 51:1-3 and Mark 2:18-22

BEYOND DOING THE RIGHT THINGS

Stop living in the past. God stands ready to do something new for you, and even now it is beginning. Rise up from your discouragement, leave your regrets and disappointments behind and your nostalgia, too. Prepare yourself for this new thing God will do for you – this new act of deliverance and life-giving, redemptive love.

Such is the message this new prophet delivers to the Jews in their Babylonian exile. He encourages them to draw from their past and learn its lessons but to dwell in the past no longer. Their best days are not behind them, but while they're fixating on the good old days, they should consider the goodness of God back then and learn from it. Their ancestors Abraham and Sarah had seemed too old for a future and much too old for a child, but God had led them to a new land and given them a son and many descendants. *So, look back to Abraham and Sarah, to their faith and their experience with God, but do not envy them or imagine that God's grace was only for them.* The past is a good teacher but a terrible place to live, especially with regrets that deepen into bitterness and harden into cynicism toward life, self, other people, and even God.

This prophet has shared his people's bitterness and cynicism. When he first hears the voice calling him to prophesy, to cry out for God to his fellow exiles, he asks rudely, "What shall I cry?" meaning, *What is there worth announcing, and why should it matter?* "All flesh is grass and its beauty like the flower of the field," he says. *Nothing good lasts. Life's glory fades, joy subsides, and hopes disappoint. Why bother?*

The prophet was very much a man of his people and their time. I think he is also a prophet for our time when cynicism is running rampant, when anger and hatred are boiling over, and when many people seem to be withdrawing into their own little private caves or shelters to find mean security in isolation, hoping only to hang on to what they have and be left alone. Cynicism has become the wisdom of our day, mockery its sense of humor, and whatever lie brings results its truth. In such a time, hope seems naive and foolish, curiosity becomes suspect, and openness to new ideas and different people suggests to some a betrayal of one's own faith and identity. It seems that in times when people pull back into themselves they withdraw also into identity groups, whether of race, religion, political persuasion, or

economic class. Cynicism seeks the company of the like-minded, disparaging and mistrusting the others.

Jesus' critics were very serious men and highly religious, much more so than most of us would have time or inclination to be. They were strict commandment keepers because doing it right was their goal in life. They believed that their ancestors were sent into Babylonian exile and that their nation was currently held under Roman domination because they had sinned by not keeping God's commandments strictly enough. Righteousness for them lay in doing the right things. Yes, they knew that attitudes and motives mattered, that the right things should be done for the right reasons, but the deeds took center stage in their religious thought and practice. They pressured each other and judged others by the standards of doing it right strictly and daily throughout the year. After all, human beings cannot read each other's mind or know each other's heart, but we can judge behavior, and do we ever!

Jesus, why don't your disciples fast on the days for fasting, as the disciples of the Pharisees and even the disciples of John the Baptist do? Why are you so lax about their spiritual practices? Are you making it too easy for them to feel righteous? Is your way religion lite?

The critics' question is about standards, requirements, and practices; Jesus' answer switches tracks completely. In his frequent style of teaching, he states a commonplace truth that the bridegroom's attendants do not fast but feast while the bridegroom is with them. In our terms, a wedding reception is a time to rejoice and celebrate, especially for those in the wedding party. *Yeah, but so what, Jesus? We're talking about a religious fast day, not a wedding reception; so your little parable is irrelevant, and the requirements of righteousness before God are to be observed, not ignored for convenience.*

But they miss the point. The critics and Jesus are asking two entirely different questions for their faith. The critics ask how to please God by satisfying God's requirements for righteousness and goodness. Today, we might ask, "What must I do to be a truly good Christian?" How do I do it right? Jesus is asking what God is doing in the world and in human life. For him, life is not a set of standards to be met and upheld but a vibrant, challenging, living, growing, sharing response to the movements of God's redemptive love. Something is happening. God is at work. He's not saying life is a big, long wedding party. He's saying that we are to live in the presence of God and not under the thumb of a set of standards by which we hope to win God's approval in a final judgment.

Let's look at the contrast in terms of human relationships. Can I be a good parent by doing everything the books say a parent should do but not listening to and responding to the unique and living person who is my child? Can I be a good husband by a set of rules? Can

friendship be spelled out by goals and standards? Can learning be imposed while curiosity is stifled?

Jesus will not have life made a rigid routine of doing the right things the right ways at the right times. God is alive, and we are alive. Faith in Jesus Christ has its beliefs and practices, but they are not in themselves faith. I could do all the right things properly at the specified times and affirm all the correct beliefs according to the most orthodox standards and still have no faith whatsoever – zero – because faith is the entrusting of life to God who loves us. We are not trying to earn or win God’s approval; we are looking to respond to God’s love.

Jesus does not make fun of what these days people call “spiritual practices” and our ancestors in the faith called “the means of grace.” I need to pray, and not only when I feel like it. I need to join the rest of you in shared worship – to respond to God as part of a community of faith in which we strengthen each other because we vary in our experiences and understandings of God’s grace, and we share the hope Christ gives us in our different ways. You see some things in life more clearly and helpfully than I do.

The Presbyterian Church now declares that I am to be called a teaching elder. That’s nice, but if I am truly to be a teaching elder, then I must always be also a learning youngster. Maybe that’s part of what Jesus meant when he said we must become as little children. The teaching elder must continue to be a learning youngster or else soon become unfit to teach.

God is doing a new thing, can we not see it? We are to live in God’s presence, not under God’s thumb. We are called to follow the leading of the Spirit out into the world and meet its people as our neighbors, even our sisters and brothers. Imagine how much harm would never be done if only we all saw each other person as a sister or brother. How many cruel words would never be spoken. Think of the terrible things people do to each other, by active cruelty and by neglect, and ask yourself how many would ever be done if we regarded each other as sisters and brothers, each and all loved by God.

Jesus calls us out of both religion lite and religion heavy and burdensome. He calls us to trust God and entrust ourselves to God’s redemptive love. We are not taking a standardized test to be scored by God someday. We are seeking to know and learning to trust God’s love for us, while respecting God’s love for the others we encounter in this world. But it’s even more than that, because God is still at work and there is much to be done in hope for the healing of so much that has gone terribly wrong. Maybe a good place to start or to resume living in the presence of the living God is to rediscover ourselves as learning youngsters, however many birthdays we have had. Amen.