

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA  
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister  
Sunday, September 2, 2018  
Lessons: Isaiah 1:11-20 and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

## NO APPEASEMENT!

I almost set aside our lectionary lesson from the Gospel of Mark to choose another reading, not because I find fault, but rather because it's hard to find a connection to us in our present time and place in life. How many of us feel compelled to strict, meticulous religious practice down to the smallest details of our daily lives?

His fellow Jews to whom Jesus speaks in our lesson have powerful motivations for what seems to us their fussiness about obeying the rules of their religion. *Wash that cup, and do it just so!* They were not being merely fussy but were striving to make sure it never happened to them again, "it" being the destruction of their temple by a foreign army which then marched them off from their ruined land into exile. *Never again!* Never again, if they could help it, would they fall short of keeping God's commandments and bring judgment upon themselves, and so they built what they called "fences around the Torah," referring to small commands not found in the Torah itself but elaborated by the rabbis to keep the people from breaking bigger commandments, to act as guardrails around a danger as, in the image offered by one modern rabbi, orange road cones may keep drivers away from deep potholes.

The danger in such caution, as Jesus points out, is not only self-righteousness but appeasement. Much of religion throughout history, pagan as well as Jewish or Christian, has sought to appease the gods and so avoid their anger. Before crossing a strange land, the traveler would sacrifice to the local god or goddess so as not to offend by tramping over sacred ground. The whole system of sacrifices was designed for appeasement. *Keep the gods calm and satisfied so they don't send misfortune. Keep yourself clean and pure so God is not offended by your presence.*

The living God does not want to be appeased and will not look favorably on our human attempts at appeasement. That's the message of Isaiah the prophet who blasts the people of Judah for their religious practices, their sacred rites, not because God detests worship as such, but because God hates religious appeasement without a change of heart and without a passion for justice that works hard to eliminate injustices and rid the land of systems that oppress the vulnerable, represented in the Bible by the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant worker. "When you stretch out your hands," God declares, "I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are

full of blood. Wash *yourselves*; make *yourselves* clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” The living God hates religion offered up as appeasement. God will not be appeased!

That’s the negative. What is the positive, the good news? After all, even the negative comes from and belongs to the good news, the gospel of our hope and salvation. In the children’s sermon, I tried to bring the negative and positive together. No true friend, no one who cares about the relationship, wants to be appeased, but wants rather to be respected and treated as a person who matters. The reason God will not be appeased is not that we can never do enough – never be religious enough, moral enough, or charitable enough to satisfy God – but that God actually loves us. God, therefore, wants to be approached with respect (not just ritualized reverence), with trust, and even eventually (step by faltering step) with love in response to love.

The problem is not in the faith practice as such but in the motive behind it. The problem is also in the fruit it bears – the result – which as Jesus points out was judgmentalism. *Why don’t your disciples wash their hands properly?*

Okay, now we come to our problem in our society, our postmodern and increasingly cynical time and place in life. The question on many minds, spoken or unspoken, is not, “How can I be properly religious?” or “How can I be a better Christian?” or even “How can I get God off my back?” but rather, “Why bother?”

The Canadian theologian from whom I continue to learn much, Douglas John Hall, cares passionately about presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ to people in North America in such ways that they, that we, are enabled to hear it as good news from Christ to us. The principle is God meets us where we are, not where we ought to be but are not. Doug Hall uses an analogy I think is helpful. He draws it from fairly familiar Greek mythology, the myths of Prometheus and Sisyphus.

Prometheus is a hero. He is the Titan, the super-human type, who steals fire from the gods to give it to mortal humans for their use, and so he raises earth’s people from darkness by giving them all the power that comes from fire. Prometheus is brave, strong, and even reckless in his daring. Though punished severely, he will not bow down. Prometheus gives us the image in which we like to see our North American lands, Canada or the United States, and want to see ourselves – not as victims, freeloaders, or petty villains, but as pioneers, entrepreneurs, inventors, achievers, winners in lands of opportunity and promise, if only we will strive.

Sisyphus also is punished by the gods for his impertinence, but his is not the image of a hero. Each day he must push a large rock up a hill, and each day he nearly reaches the crest but then the rock overwhelms him, slips from his hands, and rolls back down to the bottom. His struggle represents, not heroism, but endlessly repetitive futility.

Hall suggests that though few may admit it, many in our North American societies feel like Sisyphus wishing to be Prometheus, maybe even fooling themselves by pretending to be Promethean. Many are struggling with an oppressive sense of futility. I don't want to beat the image to death. Life is complex, and we are complex, even those of us who think we are simple. I do, however, believe it matters very much to us as Christ's church that so many people among us are, as the title of one of Hall's books suggests, "waiting for gospel"—for good news that speaks to them, matters to them, lifts them from discouragement, strengthens them for life, and quickens them with hope. I hear too many young adults who feel like Sisyphus even if they've never heard of him. I hear also too many Christians who have hope only for heaven after they have died, whereas Jesus tells us the kingdom of God is very close, indeed among us, and the Gospel of John reminds us that he came, suffered, and died because God loves the world.

Finding hope requires letting go of false hopes. The negative is that God will not be appeased, not by religion, morality, charity, or anything else. The positive is that we do not need to appease God because, contrary to what many of us believe even though our the gospel teaches the opposite, God is not in the business of reward and punishment. The truth about us is not to be found in a judgment of what we deserve. The truth about us is that God loves us and wills that love to make all the difference in how we see ourselves, how we see other people and treat them, how we react to good times and bad times, how we live in community, how we dream our dreams and craft our ambitions. God does not write off our sins, as though in some divine fudging of the record, but loves us out of them and into real, valid, and shared human life. God did not create us to be Sisyphus living out a daily grind of futility, and neither did God create us to be Prometheus striving to be more than human and always falling short. We must be open to a new human way that comes from Christ.

Sin is relational because God has made human life relational. It's not, "Did I wash my hands?" but, "Will I lend a hand to overcome injustice, hatred, cruelty, and despair?" When another prophet, Micah, blurts out Israel's frustration with God, saying in effect, "What does it take to appease you?" God answers, "What is good has been showed to you, human (not hero, not super-religious person, not slave or some nobody either, but human), and what does the LORD require of you but to make justice happen, to love kindness and mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" The world is waiting for gospel, for good news from God, and Jesus Christ has committed us to bringing it in ways people can hear and see and feel. Amen.