

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 10, 2010
Lessons: Amos 6:4-7 and Luke 7:20-23

DEPRESSED AND ANGRY ARE NOT THE ONLY TWO CHOICES

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for the one who was to come, the one whose coming would bring the kingdom of God, thereby establishing justice and peace on earth. When Jesus came to be baptized, John was sure he was the one, but now, as John sits in a prison cell, he seems to be having his doubts about Jesus. I think I might understand John somewhat better and more sympathetically than I have before.

Clearly, the baptist saw life in polarities: good versus evil, light versus darkness, reward or punishment. Sentiments about the evil in the best of us and the good in the worst of us would not have appealed to John the Baptist. He opened the door for repentance, which is what his baptizing was all about – dying to the old way of life and coming up again out of the Jordan’s muddy waters not only cleansed of sins but made new and ready to put goodness into practice. To John, Jesus may seem too tolerant of people’s sinful ways. The baptist had announced that God’s judgment was coming very soon, that the axe was already laid to the roots of the tree, ready to cut it down. *So, Jesus, where is the judgment? The righteous still go unrewarded, the wicked unpunished. Are you the one for whom we have been waiting, or was I wrong, and do we need to look for another?*

I now think there is more to John’s gripe with Jesus than just a desire to see the wrongdoers punished. I doubt the baptist is being mean-spirited and vindictive so much as he is longing for a *big change* that really makes all the difference in the world. John wants the kingdom of God to come upon earth with a bang. He expects decisive action to set things right in this world, but Jesus is out there working quietly with very ordinary people.

The problem with just setting things right all at once is that we actual people would still be ourselves both right and wrong. God created us to be free so that we could respond willingly to God’s love and care with trust in God and compassion for each other. God longs for our love rather than the slavish obedience of fear or of self-serving desire for reward.

Jesus’ parable of the wheat and tares – the good plants and weeds growing up together in the same field – makes sense to me only when I realize my own life is a field of wheat and tares sown together, and I am in part the agent of the enemy who has sown the weeds in the wheat field of my life. I am at least a participant in my choices. No, I am not powerful or

wise enough to be completely responsible for my life and the course it has taken, but neither am I simply the victim of forces too strong to resist. If I were purely a good plant or a bad one, then the kingdom of God could come with a bang and set everything straight. I would be either gathered in or discarded as chaff to be burned, and all would be set right. But Jesus knows I am a field of wheat and weeds, and the two have grown up together in my life and in my very person, which is what we rightly call a “soul.”

The factor which makes all the difference is God’s persistent love for us. Otherwise, judgment would be a snap. If you’re God, you can establish the criteria, set the deadline, and make the calls. I wonder when people say, “I call ‘em as I see ‘em,” without regard to other people’s feelings, actual choices, circumstances, responsibilities, needs, and other personal realities. God is the only one who truly sees them (the realities) as they are and so could rightly call them (make the judgment), but God does not just make the calls and let the chips fall, because God will not stop loving us.

So, God has a problem, and we are it. I believe God also has a perspective on my life very different from mine or anyone else’s. I want the best life I can live, even though I frequently fail to make the necessary efforts and changes. God cares more, I think, about the *kind of person* I am becoming, especially in the way I relate to other people in my life and in this world. That’s why Jesus follows the great command to love God with all our capacity with a second command that fits with it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Human life is relational. In God’s eyes, there is no such thing as “me and mine” apart from *you and yours* or from *them and theirs*. I cannot become the person Jesus Christ calls me to be, by myself. It can’t be done, and if I try, all I will become is self-righteous, self-absorbed, and self-congratulating or else discouraged, beaten down by life, and shamed by my failures.

In case there’s anyone who hasn’t noticed, there is a lot of anger out there in our society and in the world. Some people are enraged much of the time, and they are feeding off each other’s anger. Many more, I suspect, are resentful and not too far from their anger’s kindling point. Even more people (millions), I think, have turned their feelings inward and are living at some level of depression. Of course, what is making some people furious is the very opposite of what is causing anger or depression in others, and so Fox News and MSNBC play to one group or the other against each other night after night. I believe many, many people are disappointed with their lives and skeptical about their futures.

I have been told that terrorist organizations and the Taliban have been taking advantage of the shame and frustration felt by young Muslim men unable to get jobs and, therefore, unable to get married and become what they have been taught to regard as “full men.” Their road to manhood as they see it has been blocked, for which they are told to blame Israel and America. The groups recruiting them have been paying better wages than

are paid, for example, to Afghan soldiers. So, they are offered a manly way out of their shame, by violence, plus more money toward achieving their original goal if they survive.

The Great Recession has been bringing such realities home to us, here where many thought we were immune to the fears, frustrations, and discouragements experienced in other parts of the world. Here the person who does it right is supposed to make it to the good life, but suddenly, the paths are all blocked. “Retrain,” we tell young and older alike, “and go into a different line of work.” *Why? So, I can be out of two or three kinds of jobs instead of just one? So I can have a different career I can’t get started in, either?* The current stalled situation plus easy advice can breed cynicism.

This is not a sermon with a prescription: “Do this, and everything will turn to the better for you.” It’s not that simple, and I cannot talk someone out of anger or depression in fifteen minutes any more than I can snap my fingers and produce decent jobs. We all need to get over the delusion that there is a simple answer, some advice that will lead to a solution. But that we have no simple answers does not mean we have nothing to say, nothing to share.

I think it is good to know that God gets angry, too. Amos expresses the anger of God at the people who can afford to lounge around, indulge in cultural diversions, and lead the soft life while the nation goes down the drain. In the Eighth Century B.C., some in Israel were doing better than ever before, while many more people were sinking fast into wretched poverty and economic enslavement. God is not indifferent to the plight of the discouraged and beaten down, and gets very angry at those who take advantage of people too vulnerable to fight back. And God does not feel satisfied when averages go up because the gap between rich and poor is widening.

Faith in Jesus Christ is not a simple solution; it’s a daily struggle, most days without any immediate payoff of the kind that makes the problems go away. But faith is trust, and trust gives us, not only someone to hold on to (who will hold on to us), but also a reason to keep going. God will work with us to lead us into becoming the kind of people Jesus calls us to be. In such a time as this, we need the two great strengths Jesus calls us to gain and use: trust in God and compassion to share with each other, and I do mean “share.” When I was a kid in Plainfield’s Cook School, we used to sing, “No Man Is an Island,” from John Donne’s famous work. In times like this, no one can afford to be an island. We do better in hard times (or easier times) if we learn the truth about ourselves: we need God, and we need each other. Let Communion, then, represent our renewed commitment to seeking God and learning how to be there for each other. That, I believe, is a good start. Amen.