

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for June 20, 2010
Lessons: Psalm 139:1-6,17-18 and Luke 7:31-35

AN ANSWER FOR EVERYTHING

This parable is abnormal for Jesus. It's a complaint, a gripe – a griping parable. In his other parables, Jesus uses some ordinary situation to help us understand the extraordinary love and mercy of God. Very often he employs a teaching device we now call the “argument from lesser to greater.” For example, Jesus asks what father would give his hungry child a stone that looks like the small loaf of bread the child has requested. So, if a responsible, mentally stable human parent can be expected to give his son or daughter good things rather than harmful things, surely we can trust God, whom Jesus calls our “Father in heaven,” to care for us and provide us with good things when we ask. The love of human parents for their children is imperfect – sometimes misguided, irritable, or downright selfish – but we still expect parents to care for their children. Jesus calls upon us to think from the lesser to the greater. If we trust love when we find it in each other, how much more can we trust God's love for us? So, Jesus urges us to keep seeking God, knocking at the door, asking for the life God longs to give us.

Jesus' other parables are much the same, leading us from easily understandable human situations to the hidden ways of God. If a shepherd will take the time, trouble, and risk to go out into the night searching for one lost sheep, will God not come into our darkness to find us when we are lost? If a human father can welcome home a son who has scorned his love and treated him like dirt, then wasted his inheritance on shameful living, will God not welcome home the prodigal son or daughter who has made foolish, selfish choices and fallen into shame?

In most of his parables, Jesus speaks to our fears and doubts, urging us to trust God and not give up on God or ourselves. Before starting to build a tower, surely a man will estimate the cost to make sure he has enough money and resources to finish the project. Otherwise, the unfinished tower would stand as a monument to his poor planning and foolishness. His neighbors would laugh whenever they pointed to his tower standing there half built. Lesser to greater. If we would expect a mere human to make sure he could finish what he started, do we imagine God will not finish the work of redeeming us and our broken world, even if that work takes a very long time? Jesus tells parables to encourage us when life has discouraged us, to renew our trust in God and hope for a future far better than we can calculate based upon our own resources, possibilities, and faded dreams.

But not this one. This parable stands out like the proverbial sore thumb. Jesus is frustrated with the people of his generation. No matter what God does to persuade them to think differently and welcome God's redemptive love and mercy into their lives and into the world, they have an answer for it. They are like smartalecky children making fun of whatever they see. You know, I remember being that way, especially in junior high which would now be middle school. We were, of course, unsure of ourselves in that time of transition from childhood to youth, and we covered our uncertainties by mocking nearly everything the adults said or did. Why? In those days, we would have answered, "Because it's fun," but that was not the reason. We were very self-conscious and afraid of our vulnerabilities; so we protected ourselves by being cool and not admitting to caring about anything serious. The way to deal with the unknown or uncertain was to make fun of it. We, of course, also made fun of other kids, especially those not so cool as we were, we thought or at least pretended to think. It was a hard time of life, and being insecure, we were not kind or thoughtful, but to protect ourselves, we had an answer for everything.

Sometimes I wonder if we ever completely leave middle school behind. Of course, we refine our defenses against feeling vulnerable and learn to hide our uncertainties better. But we still pretend to be more successful at life than we actually feel, and we still bolster our self-confidence by comparing ourselves to people whose slips are showing, whose failures or weaknesses stand out.

In this parable, Jesus responds to the constant criticism aimed at him and his teaching by pointing out that his critics have defended themselves against the truth of God no matter how it has come to them. John the Baptist was out of the ordinary. John lived in the wilderness, wore rough clothing, and denied himself the normal pleasures and even sustenance of life by eating locusts and wild honey. The highly religious who prided themselves on their virtue and correctness dismissed John as a lunatic, a weirdo, so they would not have to hear his warnings or meet his challenge from God to turn from their self-satisfied ways and seek justice for the crowds of people living in misery. In their finer clothing, with their sophisticated manners, they stood apart from the poor, the disabled, the scorned, and the forgotten. Their religion gave them respectability but no compassion, virtue but no love. But, they told themselves, there was no reason to be troubled by the ravings of a fanatic like John the Baptist.

Then Jesus came, living more normally and enjoying life, but his message still challenged their showy religion, self-comforting answers about God and God's will, and lack of compassion for the troubled. Because John did not "eat and drink" like a normal person, they called him a lunatic; because Jesus did "eat and drink," they called him a glutton and a drunkard. They listened to neither John nor Jesus because they had an answer for everything.

The issue I raise with you this morning because I think Jesus raises it with us is that of our defenses against God, specifically against God's redemptive love and mercy. Let's talk about faith. We need to talk about it because the temptation — the religious temptation — is to get faith exactly backwards. We may like to think the purpose of faith is to give us certainty about life, to provide us with answers to life's mysterious and troubling questions, and to put armor over our weak spots. That's wrong. Faith, real faith, enables us to be human and vulnerable, to let ourselves feel and care without needing to have an answer for everything. A friend of mine recently posted on Facebook this quote: "The opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty." I would have said "certitude" because that sounds even more rigid and closed-minded, but the meaning is the same. Faith is trust, and trust is what we need because we can never be certain about life. We are vulnerable and need to be, because our vulnerability enables us to feel compassion for each other, and compassion is the force that makes us human. Without it, we become inhuman.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that God has become willingly vulnerable to us. The truth is that God has always been vulnerable to us because God loves us and longs for our willing love in return, which we experience and show in compassion for each other. There is and can be no love for God apart from respect and compassion for our neighbor. We cannot love God whom we are unable to see if we do not love our sister or brother whom we do see. So, in Jesus, God became visibly vulnerable — able to be hurt by us. We certainly seized our opportunity to hurt God, but what we did to Jesus was only the extreme and fulfillment of what we do to each other in this world all the time. What the religious have often refused to see is that by doing harm to people, actively or passively — by cruelty or by indifference — we are in truth doing the harm to God. Jesus put it explicitly: "As you have done it (or not cared to do it) to the least important of these, my sister or brother, you have done it (or not cared to do it) to me."

Jesus is frustrated by our having too many answers to everything. To keep ourselves from understanding and caring, we label people. Some thoughtless employers are now quietly refusing to consider for employment anyone not already employed, on the pretense that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get which, they imagine, means those who were laid off were not good workers. There is no basis in reality for that assumption, but there has never been any basis in reality for the notion that people deserve what they get and get what they deserve. Never. That's an age-old lie we keep telling to insulate ourselves from people in distress, hiding from our fears in false pride.

It's time to stop hiding from God. What God wants is not self-satisfying religion but empathy and compassion for each other. Trust not certainty. Hope not a spelled-out plan of God that invites us to be cruel by dismissing the lost or left-behind. Love not answers and labels. It's time to find our strength in our human vulnerability because that's where God has put it. Amen.