

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for September 12, 2010
Lessons: Jeremiah 4:11-12,22-28 and Luke 15:1-10

NEVER LETTING GO

For centuries, Christians persisted in teaching new generations that the Hebrew scriptures were old, not in the sense of ancient which they obviously are, but old in the sense of outdated and properly replaced by something new and better. We called them (and still call them) in our Christian rearrangement of their books, “the Old Testament.” In contrast, we called the more recent (but still ancient) writings of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, “the New Testament.” Somehow in the process of Christianity’s development, the Jew, Jesus, morphed into the anti-Jew Jesus with, as you know, horrific and murderous results: not only the Holocaust itself, but also centuries of pogroms (attacks upon Jewish communities throughout Europe, often incited by sermons), slanderous misrepresentations of Jewish beliefs and practices the church now calls sorrowfully “the teaching of contempt,” and numerous other actions that kept the Jews outside the mainstream of Christian society. Long before Nazi Germany’s overwhelmingly inhuman “Final Solution” of genocide, the church conducted the Inquisition in which Jews were not the only victims but had prominence as favorite victims. Combining the sacrament with brutal cruelty was called blasphemously, *auto de fé* — an act or work of the faith, the faith doing its work — as though Christianity rose to its best by humiliating and killing people who were supposedly its enemies. Jesus became our Savior by surrendering himself willingly to humiliation, torture, and execution. In its hypocrisy and brutality, the *auto de fé* ironically joined Christendom’s victims with Christianity’s Savior, uniting Jesus with them in their condemnation, suffering and dying.

I had not intended to begin this sermon that way. The message I had in mind was much more comforting and encouraging (and I will get to it shortly), but I believe our time demands the truth of what happens when Christian faith is perverted into a Christian partisanship that plays on fear to foster hatred and violence. Burning copies of the Qur’an is not an act of faith, except in the ironically horrible sense of the *auto de fé*. No, Qur’an burning is not murder, but it is deliberate incitement to hatred and violence. The antics of one misguided minister apparently seeking his fifteen minutes of fame are not the core the problem. Behind such folly looms the fabrication that we are engaged in a “clash of civilizations.” No, we are not. The dangerous theory of a clash of civilizations, pushes the gang mentality of the prison yard onto the international stage to provoke fear and hatred for political advantage. Muslims are not our enemies, and Islam is not the religion of the devil. We must not teach our children that being Christian is about hating somebody.

That said, let me return to the witness of the Old Testament. We Christians need to hear the angry and heartbroken God in our passage from the prophet Jeremiah and others like it. Without recognizing such anger and grief in God, we are likely to sentimentalize Jesus into impotence and irrelevancy. We need to know God can get angry. Look at what goes on in this world. If God truly does love people and demand justice, how could God not get angry? Can a reasonable and decent adult not get angry when confronted by the suffering of an abused child? What would have to be wrong with that adult not to care enough to be angered by brutality against a helpless child? What would have to be wrong with God not to be angered by the cruelties and horrors inflicted upon people by other people day after day after day? The problem, which we are at long last overcoming within Christianity, is that we were misled into equating perfection with indifference. Thankfully, the people in the pews mostly held on to their belief that God loves, that God cares, that God is indeed moved by our sufferings, no matter what philosophical theology said to the contrary.

But rather than get philosophical here, let me contend in plain human terms we all understand that love can, will, and sometimes must get angry, even very angry. God loves, and love is the kind of perfection the Bible claims for our God. So, it should be basic to all Christian teaching that God is never indifferent toward us, but is passionately committed to our healing and wholeness, to redeeming our past, loving us in the present, and opening for us a future so good that only trust and hope can envision it.

When a child is bullied or shamed unfairly or cheated out of an opportunity, does a loving parent not get angry? When the older child, much loved, bullies the younger sister or brother and does damage, do the parents not get angry? Do they say, “I couldn’t possibly get angry at you, dear, because I love you”? No, it is precisely because they love both children that they do get angry. One more example. If you see a child doing something quite wrong, you get annoyed, until you move closer and see that the child doing the wrong is your own. Suddenly, annoyance is not strong enough. You care far too much about that particular child to be merely annoyed.

God loves each person who is on this earth or has ever been on this earth — in particular. Cruelty hurts God for what it does to both the victim and the victimizer because God loves both. A few years ago, when the nation was debating the wrongness of torture, everybody saw what it did to the victims. The difference of opinions came because some liked what it did to those victims while others were horrified. But not very many people seemed to realize what torturing other people was doing to our own sons and daughters who were doing it. Being tortured does severe damage to the human body and mind. Torturing does severe damage to the human mind, heart, and soul. Because God loves, not just all, but each in particular, God is grieved and angered by the damage done by sin and suffering to

both the innocent and the guilty. Compassion does not rule out anger when the anger comes from caring.

Anger, as we know, has other sources as well, and some of it has no relation to caring about others because it comes from the belligerent or greedy ego. Anger at loss of privilege is not the same as anger at injustices. Anger at a slight to my pride differs from anger at the abuse of someone's human dignity. I believe that when teachers in our faith have told us God does not really get angry but just righteously indignant over slights to God's own holiness, they have been quite wrong. God is compassionate, not touchy. Our reading from Jeremiah shows us that not knowing God leads to not caring what is done to people. It's not offense to the divine ego that causes God pain and distress but cruelty or indifference to God's children. Knowing God results in caring about people, in being disturbed by injustices done to others, and so we share God's longing for the healing of this world and its warring peoples.

Now we have a realistic and non-sentimental context for understanding Jesus' parables of the wandering sheep and the lost coin. What is at issue in both is the offense good, religious people have taken at Jesus' concern for the lost and sinful and his identification of himself and God with them — the sinners. The message is that God will not let us go, write us off, and forget us. We matter too much.

So, Jesus uses that form of teaching known as "lesser to greater." His listeners would have agreed that a shepherd worthy of the name would go out in search of just one sheep that has wandered off and is greatly at risk, because wolves like nothing better than a lone sheep. No true shepherd would ever say, "Oh well, I have ninety-nine more; so what does that one stupid sheep matter?" Never. A sheep is too valuable to a shepherd. In the same way, a coin is too valuable to a poor woman, a woman of the land. She will not write off the loss the coin just because she has nine more. Is much explanation needed? A person is worth far too much for God to write off the loss of one because there are many more. We are sometimes able to write people off, dismissing them as not our kind, not our neighbors, not our concern, but God cannot dismiss people and forget them.

As disciples of Jesus and together as his church, we are to represent and embody for people God's refusal to let them go and forget them. It's that simple and, yes, that hard. After the Israelites had betrayed God who had redeemed them from slavery, God offered Moses the chance to go on to the land promised without the rebellious people, but Moses did exactly what God wanted him to do: he refused to go on with God unless the people came along. He would not go alone with God to the promised land. That's the calling of the church. We are to stand with the world's people and not let them go and forget them. Each one matters too much to God to forget. Then we are truly following Jesus. Amen.