

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 25, 2012
Lessons: Amos 2:6-8 and Mark 3:1-6

FIRST THINGS FIRST

God is to be trusted. God is to be feared. God accepts us. God rejects us. God loves us and longs for relationship with us. God judges us as we deserve and can quite coolly brush us away once and for all, as easily as a person brushes dust from a sleeve. I have alternated the two views of God. Which one is true? Which is biblical? Which gives us our life and message as a church?

Some of you have heard me say that I think there are two very different Christian Bibles which contain the same books with the same words but are as unlike each other as those statements about God I just alternated. One I call the *salvific Bible*, meaning it communicates to us God's desire for human salvation and the redemption of the entire created order God made and loves. Calling it salvific or saving does not mean we put on rose-colored glasses to read it so that we find nothing harsh or even unpleasant. No, the process of salvation is not all pleasant. It is a hard matter to be forgiven because forgiveness makes me see myself more clearly than I like. Salvation takes us through remorse, guilt, and shame, but they are not the objects of God's work within and among us, much as surgery is not itself the object of the surgical procedure but is, rather, a necessary means toward healing. So, please don't misunderstand reading the Bible as salvific to be a convenient way of avoiding the Bible's harsher, more painful truths, but please do understand that the Bible's truth is always that of God's redemptive love.

The other Bible I call the vindictive. If we read the Bible as vindictive, we consider God's goals to be reward for the few and punishment for the many. We see as ultimate truth God's separation of the deserving from the undeserving. For the vindictive Bible, truth happens when judgment falls, when God finally gets done being patient, terminates the work of salvation, and destroys the unbelievers.

These two Bibles are exactly the same in their words but completely different in their meanings and messages, and the difference is more than just a matter of how we interpret this passage or that verse. The difference comes from two profoundly divergent views of the will and purpose of God, and they result in two very different types of Christians and churches. "God is love." The Bible makes that statement, not as a definition of God, but as a declaration of God's one, undivided will and purpose for dealing with humanity. All God does is done for love. All God is to us is the God who loves us.

Still, the God who loves us is also deeply offended and hurt by much that we do to each other and to ourselves. So, realizing God's love for us is neither easy nor convenient. I learned early in life that knowing my parents were angry at me was a bad feeling, but knowing they were disappointed in me was far worse. The God we meet in the Bible is sometimes very angry and sometimes deeply hurt and disappointed.

But, if we were to accept the classical view of God and God's perfection found in philosophy and shot through much of the older faith-thinking of the church, we would have to admit that God could not possibly be disappointed in us or in anything we do because God would have perfect foreknowledge of everything, seeing it all before it happened, and so would be perfectly immune to disappointment or any kind of distress. The God of the biblical prophets and of Jesus is, however, quite the opposite of such sterile, all-knowing perfection. The one thing God is never toward us is indifferent, unmoved, detached. God always cares. Indifference is false perfection. The unmoved God is a philosophical lie. God is love, and love makes itself vulnerable to the one loved. We who are so vulnerable to countless forces around us and within our bodies, minds, and emotions may quite understandably imagine perfection to be invincible and invulnerable, but God's perfection is love – self-giving love. Therefore, God's perfection is revealed to us fully, not on a heavenly throne but on an earthly cross.

Jesus embodies God's self-willed vulnerability to us, the best and the worst of us alike. Flesh is vulnerable. We humans are subject to the countless limitations of bodily existence in time and place. We age, we get sick, we break our bones; we also suffer grief, shame, and disappointment that hurt far more than a broken bone. Being human can hurt a lot. Jesus is one of us. He represents in his teaching, healing, life, and death the empathy and compassion of God for all of us. In him, we know the will and purpose of God, and they are salvific – saving, redemptive, reconciling, healing, life-giving, loving.

The Gospel of Mark shows us how the difference works. Jesus' critics are strict commandment keepers. They put first things first, and what they put first is the commandment: the Sabbath. But what they really prize is the authority the commandments give them to know what is right and what is wrong, who is deserving and who undeserving. So, when they notice a man with a withered hand, what they see is bait – Jesus bait. They know he heals people, and they suspect he will not let the Sabbath regulations stop him from healing. Eagerly they watch to see if he will take the bait. When judgment is their truth, people turn cruel. They view compassion as weakness. They calcify knowledge of God into standards by which to evaluate and judge. They worship norms and learn to feel nothing but disgust for people who do not measure up to those norms.

Judgment is not the purpose for which God gave Israel the commandments. Before giving any commandment, God had adopted this band of slaves as the covenant people God

would love faithfully down through the ages. The commandments teach them and guide them in the ways of responding to God's love and making it their way of life as a people. That's why Jesus sums them all up in the two commandments to love God with all we have and all we are and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Notice that the healthful kinds of self-love are not excluded. Because God loves us, we ought to be able to come to love ourselves – not to be narcissistic, to be in love with ourselves and act as though the whole world revolves around us and exists to grant our wishes – but to care for, respect, and value ourselves as people God loves. That kind of self-love makes better and deeper changes in us than mere standards could ever possibly make. Tell children what they must learn because they will be tested on it and the test will reward or punish them, and they may learn something for a short time (long enough for the test); help them come to love learning, and they will never stop. So it is also with faith. Scare people enough with threats of punishment or lure them with promises of paradise, and they will believe whatever you tell them to believe, at least long enough for the test. Help them learn to be and live as people loved, forgiven, and set free by God, and they will never stop.

Jesus is clever, although not in self-serving ways. He sees what his critics have in mind, but he will take the bait anyway because he refuses to see the afflicted man as bait. The self-righteous commandment keepers put first things first, and so does Jesus, but they differ sharply over what the first things are. Their view is vindictive; his view is salvific. He has not come to judge and condemn but to heal and set free. Why do I say Jesus is clever? His critics think they are forcing him to choose between his way of compassion and their way of authoritative standards, but he turns the tables and makes them choose. Jesus calls forward the man with the withered hand. Now, he asks his critics, what do you want me to do? Should I send him away unhealed? Or should I send his affliction away? Which choice honors God and the Sabbath? The man is standing there before you and before God. Which choice can be made in the Spirit of God?

Notice, however, that Jesus is not content to win by turning the tables. He does not feel triumphant over outsmarting his enemies; rather, he is angry and grieved because he has failed to win them over for God. He heals the man's hand, but he cannot soften their hard hearts. When we fail to put the true first things first – God's love and compassion, God's desire for human well-being and for justice with mutual respect in the human community – then we feel righteously free to trample on people we regard as undeserving. But when we put the true first things first, we and our lives are transformed, and so is Christ's church. The third of our three visioning questions reads, "What is Jesus Christ calling us to be and to do (as a church)?" We are striving to put first things first, his way. We will do so as a church as we learn to do so as individual believers and as families. Then we will learn to know and serve the truth of God this world needs so desperately. Amen.