

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2010
Lessons: Isaiah 55:1-9 and Luke 13:1-9

ONE THING GOD IS NEVER

Later this morning, we will launch an inquirers' class as our adult forum for the Sundays of March — a sort of mini-course on what we are “all about” as a church or, in more traditional terms “our faith and practice.” I will not, however, present our faith as a checklist of doctrines or our practice as a set of regulations and procedures. Instead, in our discussions, we will work from questions phrased as, “What is it to be . . . ?” such as, “What is it to be the First Presbyterian Church of Bridgeton in the year 2010?” But we'll start with, “What is it to be Christian?” My purpose is not to distinguish real Christians from phonies. The message is not, “Believe these things this way, or be wrong; and follow these rules, or be wicked.” I will start with the Bible's assumption that *human* is a relational term because God created us to love and enabled us to respond freely and willingly to God's love for us, keeping in mind always that God also loves the other person, our neighbor in this world. Because God not only created us all but loves us all, we are, like it or not, the *human family*. So, what is it to be Christian within the human family that for thousands of years has been divided against itself at every level? If Christians indeed represent Christ, how? To pursue that question, we need to delve deeper than accepted doctrine and ask what Jesus Christ means to us and how our self-understandings relate to him. Consider yourself invited.

For the Bible, God's truth is never a set of principles that can be reviewed and accepted without concern for our relatedness to God and to other people. God's truth is always relational, never objective. That does not mean God disregards the facts about us; it means God always considers the facts as loving parents would consider the facts about their children, *only more so*. Jesus insists upon that “more so.” Using the parent analogy for God in relation to us, he asks, “If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?” Loving parents cannot possibly be neutral about their child, nor should they be. They may have to face up to disturbing realities and take corrective action, but they never step back and deny relatedness, deny love, deny love's grief and perhaps anger over those disturbing realities about their child. They cannot and should not be indifferent, and that is the one thing God can never be toward us. God is never indifferent.

Did you know that, following Aristotle and other philosophers, the Christian church accepted and developed attributes of God that added up to perfect apathy, the divine

indifference of the “Unmoved Mover”? That Unmoved Mover was supposedly God. How did we get to such a terrifying view of God? We tried to look at the idea of God apart from relationship with us. The Bible offers absolutely no view of God apart from relationship with us. Biblically, there is no such thing.

Let’s go back to the parent analogy, remembering that God is *like that* but much more so. By having or adopting a child, loving parents have given up forever any view or understanding of themselves that does not include that child. No matter what, they will be always that child’s, that person’s, parents—regardless of the state of relations between them and their daughter or son, regardless even of whether that child still lives. God is like that, Jesus insists, only more so.

People use the phrase “God’s will” for the most awful events: the death of a child, the earthquakes that have ravaged Haiti and Chile, and (unbelievably) even wars and recessions that are clearly caused by human beings. What are they talking about? When Jesus teaches us to pray, “Your will be done on earth,” he is urging us to pray *against* such terrible things, to long for that day when they will no longer happen on earth, and so to commit ourselves to what he tells and shows us is truly the will and purpose of God. Calling everything bad that happens “God’s will” excuses us from even trying to change the conditions that fostered the hurtful and tragic, and it also excuses us from caring very much.

Let me paraphrase the conflict of world-views in our reading from Luke.

“Jesus, did you hear that God pushed a tower over and killed some sinners in Jerusalem?”

“Say what? Why do you think those people were any more sinful than others?”

“Well, the collapse of the tower was God’s will, wasn’t it? Don’t people get what they deserve and deserve what they get? Is God not just and fair? And is justice not a matter of rewarding virtue and punishing transgression?”

“I tell you, the victims of the tower’s collapse and the victims of Pilate’s brutality were no more sinful than others. No, God is not in the business of handing out rewards and punishments. What God wants is for all people to repent—to turn back and be embraced by God’s love and be healed and be made whole. But such true repentance would change everything about human life.”

That's my paraphrase of Jesus' dialogue with the standard beliefs of his time and their eagerness to blame the victims and so preclude sympathy and block change toward a more just and maybe even compassionate human community.

The Prophet of the Exile tells the Jews in their Babylonian captivity much the same. Their God's will for them has always been for life and wholeness within the covenant relationship, which means God got very angry at their callousness and cruelties, but God never stopped loving them and longing for their return.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree in Luke has been misinterpreted by mistakenly viewing it as an allegory. Christians have said the landowner is God the Father—the parent in our analogy—and the gardener who cares enough about plants to give the fig tree another chance is Jesus. There are problems with that allegorical interpretation, beyond even the basic problem of misunderstanding parable as allegory. Jesus did not play himself off against God. He did not cast himself in the role of the compassionate one, with God as the judgmental one willing to write people off with the wave of a hand. Here again, Jesus is telling us that God is like a human being who cares deeply, but God is even more so. Much more so. The gardener cares about a fig tree, but he will not die for one, unless he is deranged. Jesus would have us understand that it is quite normal for a true gardener to “go the extra mile” to save a plant. Is anyone who is a gardener or has ever lived with a gardener surprised by that? Is it not more like this?: “Well, here she goes again. I know her, and she'll do whatever she can to save that plant instead of just pulling it out and replacing it.” Exactly, and God is infinitely more that way with a person, because God is so committed to loving us.

The parent-child analogy is not perfect, but when people have had loving parents, it is very good and helpful. Serious problems for communicating the gospel through this parent-child analogy to God's love for humanity arise because many people have had bitter experiences with far less than loving parents, sometimes extending throughout their childhood and beyond. The son or daughter of an abusive parent will find this analogy to God most unhelpful and painful, but in that case, it is not analogous to God's love.

The one thing the Bible assures us and Jesus shows us that God is never, ever, is indifferent toward us. Angry at what we humans do to each other or to ourselves? Yes, and that anger is analogous to parental love, isn't it? Frustrated by our apathy, our callousness? Yes. Grief-stricken by our lack of responsiveness but also – and this is very important – by our sufferings and griefs? Absolutely, yes. But indifferent? No, not ever. God is not capable of indifference toward us—that I believe. What hurts the child, hurts the loving parent, even if it was the child's own fault. When sisters or brothers hurt each other, that angers and grieves the loving parent. God is that way, only much, much more so. Amen.