

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for September 19, 2010  
Lessons: Jeremiah 31:15-20 and Luke 15:11-24

## THE WAY GOD IS

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

William Blake put his poem to the tiger in his, “Songs of Experience,” and to the lamb in his, “Songs of Innocence.”

Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?

A link is forged when the experience poem asks the fearsome tiger,

Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Is it true that hope and joy and peace belong to our time of innocence, while discouragement, grief, and strife are what we gain from experience? Is maturity just a word for learning to settle for less than our dreams? The Bible pictures the loss as expulsion from the Garden of Delight (Eden means delight). Is that the way life is?

Jesus challenges people who know only too well how life is for the poor, the sick, and those disinherited by society — challenges them to discover how God is. When they have thought about the matter at all, people have generally assumed that God is the way society and nature are experienced. So, those beaten down by society or disadvantaged by nature have thought (and have often been told) that God does not favor them. To the comfort of the already comfortable and the discouragement of the already beaten-down, we human beings have concluded that God is the Overlord of the way things are. What you see is what you get, and what you get is supposedly what God wants you to get. Then, adding guilt and shame to bitterness, religion declares that what you get is what you deserve.

More than a few people have turned their backs upon religion once they have seen that those who prosper are no more deserving than those who live in misery but simply more refined and better dressed. Because they control the systems and win by them, the prosperous do not need to mug people on the street or break into others' homes to steal; they can take all they want and far more than they need by the rules the prosperous themselves make and enforce.

Jesus came to us with the astounding news that God is not the Overlord of the way things are. Much of human religion has been no more than justification for the ways of society and nature, rationalizing the prosperity of the great and the misery of the rest. Jesus announced God's coming to change the way things are, warning us that many now first would be put last while the last would be moved up to first.

The important point here that I want to emphasize this morning is that we do not know God from our experiences of the ways of society or nature. God is not the Overlord of the way things are. God comes with compassion to welcome the lost home, to bind up the broken and heal the wounded, to lift up those beaten down by life, and to give fresh hope to the discouraged and even the despairing. Jesus assures us that much in the way things work now is wrong and will be changed.

Jesus' parable of the two lost sons is much more complex than the two parables we read last Sunday from the same chapter of Luke: the lost sheep and the lost coin. The younger son, whose story we have read this morning, treats his father shamefully, saying to him in effect, "Hey, Dad, I can't wait around here for you to die before I get what's coming to me. So, let's just settle the estate now, dissolve this father-son relationship, and I'll be on my way." Unwilling to restrain his son, the father complies, giving him the one-third of the estate that would be his inheritance, and the son departs, breaking all ties to his family, his people, and his God. Off he goes to live it up.

If Jesus' listeners readily agreed that a worthy shepherd would, of course, go out in search of just one lost sheep and that a poor woman would search for her lost coin until she found it, and that both would rejoice upon recovering what they had lost, such ready agreement with this parable cannot be assumed. Would a father treated so horribly even let his son come home? Perhaps, but if he did, would he not use the opportunity to put the young man on probation and keep him under his thumb? Would he not do exactly as his former son suggests and take him on as a servant farmhand?

This father is almost unbelievable. He owes this son nothing, having already "died" to him and settled the estate. How bitter is that pill to swallow? We might understand that even a father who has been treated with such shocking callousness and contempt might still

feel some longing for the son he once had and might give him a chance for a change of heart, a chance to prove himself. But this father goes far beyond offering a tentative second chance. Recognizing his son from a distance, he runs to embrace him. Ignoring the canned speech which any skeptic would consider just a way to get more out of his father after he has already squandered everything he rightfully had coming, this father calls for three items, symbolic of belonging to the family, of adulthood, and of freedom and even authority in the household. He restores his son's lost manhood, represented by the sandals (slaves went barefoot), the long robe (boys wore short ones), and the ring. Why? Listen to God.

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD.

That's the way God is. This strange father in Jesus' parable, who goes far beyond what we might expect and even beyond what many would consider right and fair and just or even wise, he represents the way God is.

And get the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;  
for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and  
is found!

The message is clear. When we put God out of our lives, we become lost and dead, but even if we forget God, God never forgets us but longs for our return. We are not created to live apart from God, and we cannot be the people we are meant to become while we live apart from God. But God will not go away and leave us. Jesus became the living and dying embodiment of God's refusal to let the relationship be broken and lost forever.

Rather even this than that! The torture, humiliation, and death Jesus took willingly upon himself — *rather this, than to lose you*. That is the way God is toward us.

And we need to get out of our minds the disgusting picture of God the Father Almighty sitting in heaven looking down unmoved upon the agony and death of the Son. Forget it. That's philosophical nonsense, and we can be grateful for people such as Abraham Heschel and Jürgen Moltmann who have renounced such nonsense and opened for us again an understanding of the broken heart of God. If Jesus' parable does not show us longing and compassion, then what does it show? If God were indifferent toward us or just had a grand plan to favor some and reject others or to dole out rewards and punishments according to what we deserve, then why Jesus? If the outcomes are already spelled out, is what we call "salvation" just a game? We are not going forward on the right path of life until we take seriously God's longing for us, because that's the way God is. Amen.