

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister
Sunday, August 11, 2019
Lessons: Isaiah 1:10-20 and Luke 12:32-40

WHO'S ROCKING THE BOAT?

When I was four or five years old, my big sister taught me to row a boat, and because I liked rowing I grew competent at handling the oars and controlling the boat's movements, I grew comfortable out on the lake. One day she asked me to take her out away from the shoreline so she could swim in the deeper water without encountering underwater plants or the muck of decayed vegetation. "Sure," I was always glad to row and was not yet allowed to take the boat out by myself. When we reached a spot Pat liked, she stood, stepped up onto the very edge of the rowboat, and dove into the water. As we were in a flat bottomed boat, there was no danger of overturning, but that day I learned what people mean when they say, "Don't rock the boat." The first time was unsettling but good experience as I learned to be unafraid but still careful out on the water.

When the church I served was engaged in a visioning process designed to be ongoing as we sought revitalization for ministry and service in changed circumstances, I asked the visioning team and others who were interested to think of their favorite Bible passages, hymns, prayers, and sayings of the faith, then divided what came to mind under two headings: comfort and challenge. The comfort column filled quickly, but with more thought we found plenty for the challenge column as well. It is quite normal for people of faith in Jesus Christ to seek comfort and encouragement. Life rocks our boats, and we need reassurance that we can count on God to steady us, strengthen our hands and minds, and keep us from capsizing or else pull us out of the water if we do. We don't go looking for God to rock the boat, but sometimes God needs to because we need our comfort shaken.

God sent the prophet Isaiah to the leaders and people of Jerusalem to rock their boat. In the first verse of our lesson, he starts out with bang by addressing them, not as Israel, God's own beloved covenant people, but as "rulers of Sodom" and "people of Gomorrah." Sodom and Gomorrah are the two legendary cities of unmitigated wickedness in which God was unable to find a single person who did not delight in cruelty.

But Isaiah does not call the people to be more religious, more piously God-oriented, more diligent in their spiritual practices. No, instead he voices God's disgust at their religious practices. God detests, not only their ritual sacrifices, but also their hymns, prayers, and sacred observances.

Imagine how we would feel if someone came into our sanctuary and told us God could no longer tolerate our hymns, our prayers, our sermons, or even our sacraments. “When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.” That could make us lose our religion, which, in a way, is exactly what God wants. It’s not that we’re doing religion improperly any more than the people of ancient Jerusalem were. The problem is doing religion *instead of* taking personally God’s love for us and for all people. God takes it very personally.

Let me use an analogy we can understand readily. A young man loves his wife very much, and she loves him. One day, as will happen, he takes her for granted and does something or says something that disregards her validity as an adult human partner with him in life. When she reacts angrily and tearfully, he feels terrible. So, not knowing what else to do, he runs out and buys her a beautiful bouquet of flowers which he presents to her with a sincere and thoughtful apology. Her anger melts away, and her hurt feelings are healed because she knows he truly does love and respect her, and the flowers express the truth of his love. So far, so good. But when he does something else similarly inconsiderate and she confronts him, he remembers that flowers worked last time. So he buys her flowers – again and again until the bouquets become his standard fix for her anger or tears – a fix that fixes nothing, a fix “instead of” fixing – until she hates the very sight of a pretty bouquet.

For centuries, religion has been often the great “instead of” for fixing wrongs without changing lives. The religious questions became how to pacify God, how to keep God on our side so we can stay healthy and prosper, how to achieve a fair level of contentment with ourselves as we are, and how to sooth our anxieties without giving up any of our advantages. Societies ancient and modern have used religion to maintain the current order as though it were established by God, sanctifying the prevailing economic and political practices to preserve the power of the powerful. Such religion likes to equate poverty with wickedness or at least sloth and prosperity with a superiority deserving of God’s favor. Jesus warns the rich and powerful, the healthy and wealthy, not because they are less religious, but because their religion insulates them very effectively against the call of God to change things in favor of justice for the poor, respect for people of unpopular minorities, welcome for the outsiders, fairness for workers, and regard for the humanity of all because God loves them all.

The puppet parable was indeed a parable. Nick could not be Jed’s friend as long as he kept bullying Andrea, the mouse who was also Jed’s friend. That’s what God is telling the people and leaders of Jerusalem: they cannot approach God as long as they are mistreating the vulnerable among them, abusing foreigners who live in their land, cheating widows and orphans through unjust laws they themselves have passed, and then bringing God more pretty bouquets.

The Gospel Luke, in our second lesson, compiles some of Jesus' teachings and warnings that rock the boat of any comfortable religion that tries to keep life unchanged. Jesus calls us to detach ourselves from our fears and our enslavements. *Be ready for what is coming that will change everything. Live in hope for what God is promising, and let that hope guide you, determine your priorities and desires, and offer you treasure that is real.*

Jesus is rocking our boat. "For where your treasure is," he warns us, "there your heart will be also." In his language, the "heart" did not represent feelings and sentiments but was seen as the source of our thoughts, motives, desires, and choices. His prayer, "Your will be done on earth," asks that our desires be conformed to God's will, so that we will crave what God desires for this world and its people: justice, compassion, mutual respect, and mercy.

We are in a time of crisis. When false preachers are linking Christ's name to selfishness and greed in the so-called prosperity gospel – *get with Jesus to get rich*. When faith is turned into a belligerent Christian partisanship seeking privilege and painting people of other religions or no religion as evil enemies. When the desperate and vulnerable are being abused, even children, and their suffering celebrated as some sort of sick victory for a supposedly superior race. When people are slaughtered so often, so many, that mass murder is dismissed as just the way things are. When women are slandered and degraded just for being women. When creation itself is sacrificed to lust for profits. When employers steal wages from workers who live in the shadows of fear, their voices silenced. When turning us against each other becomes smart politics.

My first pastorate was in the anthracite coal region of this state where traditionally men did hard, dangerous jobs they knew were slowly killing them, but they could hold up their heads because they were supporting their families and making way for better, healthier lives for their children; and now their way of self-respect and purpose is gone. When people feel shame thrust upon them undeserved, they may turn those feelings inward upon themselves, and so we have the opioid crisis and other means of dangerous escape. Or they may turn those feelings outward in resentment toward people they can blame, outsiders who seem to them invaders, and resentment can be fanned into the flames of rage, and so it is that hate groups recruit.

Who's rocking our boat? God is. Jesus Christ is. Yes, there is still comfort for those who risk answering Christ's call. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." But we cannot have comfort "instead of" answering the call. We need to detach from the treasures that hold us back from learning to want what God wants, not only for us, but for this world and its people. Our salvation in Christ is very personal because God loves us personally, but salvation does not come with power, privilege, and prestige but, rather, with humility, service, justice, and compassion. Amen.