

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
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Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 5:1-7 and Luke 12:49-56
August 14, 2022

IN SUCH A TIME AS THIS

Well, by what some might consider the luck of the draw, I have received from our lectionary a pair of very negative Scripture readings, the New Testament lesson even more negative than the Old. Positive thinking has its virtues, but anything devised by human beings can be overdone. For a while, books were telling us never to permit ourselves a negative thought, but we do have negative, painful feelings which are natural and not to be solved by putting on a happy face. Also, sometimes we gain understanding of what something is by saying (or painfully experiencing) what it is not.

In his famous love chapter, I Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul makes effective use of this negative way of helping us understand. First, he writes positively, “Love is patient and kind,” but then he gives us a list of negatives about the most positive thing in the world. Love is not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude. It does not keep score of wrongs, and does not insist upon getting its own way. The other day I unwrapped a wedge of Gouda cheese, still in date, but found green mold on one surface. So, I pared away what was not cheese. Paul’s negatives pare away our human tendencies that neither come from love nor have any place in it but, rather, spoil love.

For us, as for the people of his time, Isaiah negates religious misunderstandings of what we call God’s unconditional love. On the bright side, if unconditional love means God does not reject me for who I am, does not bar my way to life because I am unworthy of favor or even consideration, and does not require me to clean up my life before looking to Jesus Christ for hope and salvation, then, yes! God’s love is unconditional. Faithful parents love their child no matter what. That’s the positive meaning of unconditional love.

So, what’s the negative? Isaiah tells us. That God loves us as good parents love their children, only infinitely more so, does not mean that God is indifferent to the way we live or that God expects no changes in the way think and treat each other. God cares deeply about the way we live and especially about the way we treat each other and structure our society for justice or else for legally protected injustices and cruelties. Stay with the analogy of good parents. That they love their child no matter what certainly does not mean they do not care what their child does or what kind of person that child is becoming. That their love persists no matter what means love will sometimes hurt them, anger them, or grieve them to the heart.

God is grieved by what the people of Judah have become and is, therefore, angry with the furious anger of love's hope dashed and brought to grief by the one so greatly loved. Judah did not need to earn, deserve, or win God's love and care, but God did expect the beloved people to respond in kind to the love they were freely given.

Because love is God's motive, God's purpose, and God's means for advancing that purpose, God can indeed get angry, be hurt, and then feel compassion that overpowers grief's bitterness. Jesus shows unearned respect for all the wrong people. He also shows very much earned anger at the religiously hard-hearted. But he never turns away from people in disgust or indifference. In warm compassion or hot anger, he offers people – the good, the bad, and the wretched – the love of God some think they deserve but others doubt they can ever possibly have. Unsurprisingly, Jesus has an easier time with people who know they deserve nothing good from God, but even so, he does not give up on the proudly virtuous and piously cruel people, either.

I drive around the area and see signs asking me, "Where will you spend eternity?" The prophet's question is, rather, *How will God's redemptive love and God's faithfulness in caring for you change the way you live together here and now?* But in our reading, Isaiah puts the question in its negative form because God is grieved that the much-loved people have not responded in kind, that the carefully planted and well tended vineyard bears the sour grapes of legalized injustices and unrestricted greed.

There's the big problem: Judah's religion had become protection against God, against the changes God wanted in the nation's life, and against the discomfort of caring about each other, especially the most vulnerable among them. *No matter*, they thought, *God will always forgive, always protect, always secure us and our chosen way of life.* To Isaiah went the task of warning them, *No, God will not!*

Our New Testament reading is even harder to take, especially if we think Jesus came to smooth everything out, make God pleased with us, and create blissful peace among us. We human beings like religion or just about anything else that promises peace of mind and the undisturbed, unquestioned pursuit of our own goals and dreams.

Jesus came, not to establish religion, but to announce the coming of the kingdom of God and call upon people to turn to it and welcome it. But the coming of God's kingdom here on earth means change – radical, deep down, and, yes, disruptive change. That's why Jesus declares the poor to be blessed: not because poverty is a virtue (let alone a blessing), but because the poor will welcome the kinds of change God wants and means to bring about in our world. It is much harder for the rich and successful to welcome changes that make for

a more just society. We don't like giving up privilege we have enjoyed and learned to consider ours by right.

Your interim minister has been calling you to such good fruits as mutual respect, deliberate efforts at understanding each other, and purposefully developed ways for working together as church. When I was pastor of a church working through self-understanding and re-visioning of our shared life and mission, I drew on a board two concentric circles that looked like a donut to represent any church including that one. The inner circle was for the core of people who speak of the church as “we” – “What are we doing about this or that?” – and may feel they shoulder too much of the responsibility. The outer ring was for people more likely speak of the church as “they.” *What are they planning to do now? How much money do they want?* I hear Jim Shuler calling you together so that more and more will come to see themselves as belonging to the “we” of Leacock Presbyterian Church, no longer outsiders, bystanders, or fringe members. Understanding each other respectfully requires the work of cultivation but can bear good fruit.

Can we read our current signs of the times? Christianity is not supposed to be in charge of the society, telling people what to think and how to live and enforcing its demands with power. Jesus has forbidden us to exercise or even seek power over others. That's not his way. Such was folly of European Christendom now passed on to forces in America that want Christian dominance. No, belligerent Christianity is anti-Jesus.

I had a wise professor in seminary who warned us always to let the scandal, the stumbling block, of Jesus Christ be left where it truly belongs: not in authoritarian doctrines, rules, or laws, but in the self-giving redemptive love of the Christ crucified because God so deeply loves the world. It is the mark of authoritarian corruptions of Christianity that, whereas Jesus sacrificed himself for others who rejected him, authoritarians acting falsely under the name of Christ are far more inclined to sacrifice others to their own ambitions. Jesus became the scapegoat standing in unity with the world's many scapegoats. Christianity seeking power for itself names already despised and vulnerable groups as scapegoats to gain control by uniting us against them – the outsiders, the different, the disliked.

Is it not true that Jesus warned us we would face rejection, scorn, and worse? Yes, but let it be for the right reason. Let the scandal fall where it falls rightfully – on the cross, on the self-sacrificing love of God, and not on people's resistance to Christian legalism and authoritarianism. We should not be recognized as Christians by whom we hate or by our contempt for already vulnerable people. We need to see the signs of the times and then make sure that the way we offend is with the humility of standing with the vulnerable, identifying with the shamed, and representing the redemptive love of Jesus Christ for both those who don't think they need it and those who can't believe it would ever be offered to them. Amen.