

Perspectives

Last week we did some Bible study on the lessons of the day, and I'd like to continue our study on today's lessons.

The best starting point for a Christian preacher is the gospel reading. Today we hear of Jesus doing something characteristic of His ministry to those in need, the healing of a sick person (Luke 13.10-17). Jesus as healer is a particular theme of Luke's gospel, perhaps one of the reasons for the traditional attributing of this anonymous gospel to Luke the beloved physician mentioned in *Colossians* (4.14). Jesus heals a woman bent over from osteoporosis, or thinning of bone, which causes the vertebrae of the spine to collapse; hence the woman is bent over and unable to stand up straight. That is, until Jesus touches her and in some mysterious fashion that which had bound her to a limited life is corrected and she is made whole and healthy, restored to the full life that had been denied her for so many years. We can all rejoice at this story of God's healing power in Her Messiah, a story that promises healing to us as well.

But, of course, that is not the end of today's episode. The leader of the synagogue does his duty in defending his idea of the sanctity of the sabbath. No work – and healing is work – is to be done on God's holy day of rest. Here we should think of today's Isaiah reading with its injunction to honor the sabbath, “not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs.”

Here I am reminded of those ambiguous graphics we have all seen. You know, where you look at it one way and see one thing, and then when you look at it another way you see something else. My favorite is the one where you switch back and forth between seeing two faces in outline or a single chalice in the center. There are others; call to mind the work of Maurits Escher, those eye-crossing graphics that do seemingly impossible things. It all depends on how you look at it.

That is what Jesus points out. It all depends on how you look at it and what your priorities are. The villagers water their animals on the sabbath, a work which is a necessity for the animals' health and well being; no one questions this act of essential mercy. Jesus then points to the woman, and here we have the switch in perception, not only for the village crowd, but for us as well. Instead of being a poor nothing, Jesus identifies her as that most honored of people, a child of Abraham, a child of God's promise to humankind. Is she not more worthy of mercy than a donkey or an ox? Jesus' act is switched from being a breaking of the sabbath to being an act of God-demanded mercy; the perception *about* Jesus is switched from being a sinner, a breaker of the sabbath, to being a merciful, God-directed healer. Maurits Escher would have been proud!

What is the lesson for us? Well, certainly admiration for the compassion and power of the God-man Jesus. Certainly a call to think carefully about our priorities; sometimes our choice is not between good and evil, but between two goods. Which is the more important, keeping the letter of the sabbath or loosing the bonds that have bound a woman for eighteen years? Which honors the God of the sabbath more? And just as certainly, we have a cautionary lesson in perception for ourselves, in how *we* see things. Perhaps what we are perceiving can be seen from another perspective and therefore call for a different approach.

There is a corollary to this: that we should be humbly careful about judging or condemning someone who is different from ourselves. Sometimes, of course, there is reason for judgment and condemnation, but at other times we are called to honor the integrity of sane people of good will who are just seeing reality from a different perspective. Sometimes we are even called to change our viewpoint, as, one hopes, the opponents of Jesus might have changed theirs.

Before we leave this theme, please note that the Isaiah reading is pertinent to this story of Jesus in another way. The second part of the reading is indeed about honoring the sabbath and the good things that will come from this honoring. But the first part of the reading is about mercy and kindness and the rewards that come with them. Notice that there is even the phrase “make your bones strong.” What could be more pertinent to today’s story of Jesus than that?

Let’s take a look at the reading from the New Testament book of *Hebrews* (12.18-29). *Hebrews* was probably written by a disciple of Saint Paul; its theme is contrasting the inadequate Jewish way of thinking and doing with the abundance of the followers of Christ. The book comes from a time when the distinction between Jewish Christians and more traditional Jews was becoming clearer and filled with animosity. Picture a first-century town with a synagogue just down the street from the house where the Christians were gathering and worshiping. *Hebrews* tries to show why a seeker would choose Christian Judaism over traditional Judaism. In our ecumenical age it can seem a little offensive, but I think we can do true ecumenical work only through a strong sense of our own tradition and thinking coupled with an equally strong respect for those who are different from us. Our ancestors in the faith were just a little more ham-handed about it. Would that both sides had been a little more understanding with one another.

So, with that as background, let’s look at today’s reading from *Hebrews*. The first part recalls the terror of the people as Moses receives the old Law on the heights of Mount Sinai. Thunder, lightning, earthquake – the majesty of God was on display and it was scary! Contrast that, says our writer, with the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, brought by Jesus. Mount Zion is the ridge in Jerusalem where the Temple is built. Here is the new Temple, Jesus Christ, and His message of purpose and forgiveness and love. The new message – the new law of love – will shake both heaven and earth; only the heavenly will survive that test. The earthly will pass away; only the heavenly is a kingdom that cannot be shaken. If you were an ancient seeker of truth, which kingdom, which message, would you want to belong to? That is *Hebrews’* point.

A bit obscure for us modern readers. So let me re-read our Hebrews passage from a modern popular version that I like, *The Message*, paraphrased by Presbyterian minister and theologian Eugene Peterson. Here's how he expresses the same passage:

18-21 Unlike your ancestors, you didn't come to Mount Sinai—all that volcanic blaze and earthshaking rumble—to hear God speak. The earsplitting words and soul-shaking message terrified them and they begged him to stop. When they heard the words—"If an animal touches the Mountain, it's as good as dead"—they were afraid to move. Even Moses was terrified.

22-24 No, that's not your experience at all. You've come to Mount Zion, the city where the living God resides. The invisible Jerusalem is populated by throngs of festive angels and Christian citizens. It is the city where God is Judge, with judgments that make us just. You've come to Jesus, who presents us with a new covenant, a fresh charter from God. He is the Mediator of this covenant. The murder of Jesus, unlike Abel's—a homicide that cried out for vengeance—became a proclamation of grace.

25-27 So don't turn a deaf ear to these gracious words. If those who ignored earthly warnings didn't get away with it, what will happen to us if we turn our backs on heavenly warnings? His voice *that* time shook the earth to its foundations; this time—he's told us this quite plainly—he'll also rock the heavens: "One last shaking, from top to bottom, stem to stern." The phrase "one last shaking" means a thorough housecleaning, getting rid of all the historical and religious junk so that the unshakable essentials stand clear and uncluttered.

28-29 Do you see what we've got? An unshakable kingdom! And do you see how thankful we must be? Not only thankful, but brimming with worship, deeply reverent before God. For God is not an indifferent bystander. He's actively cleaning house, torching all that needs to burn, and he won't quit until it's all cleansed. God himself is Fire!

So what's the message we take for our lives? Hebrews offers us the grace and favor and optimism of belonging through a process of trust to a resurrected Lord in an unshakable destiny that is nothing short of heaven itself.

Not bad for a dusty old book written by a dead white man!

In closing, let us pray for those who shall choose a rector for this parish: Almighty God, giver of every good gift: Look graciously on your Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a rector for this parish, that we may receive a faithful pastor, who will care for your people and equip us for our ministries, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.