

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday, June 13, 2010

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 6C 2010

In the name of our on ever creating, ever loving and ever sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every now and then our lectionary pitches us some good ones and this week's lessons are winners! Our first reading today from the First Book of Kings was written in final form about 2,500 years ago and it recounts events occurring during the reign of King Ahab around 850BC. Betrayal, perjury, theft, murder – they are all really old stuff!

Today's lesson really hammers home the fact that the whole Law indeed the whole Bible stands on a foundation of ethics: Love of God and Love of Neighbor. When we forget that as we read the Bible, we stray from its purpose. We met Elijah in last week's lesson when he declared God's prophetic judgment of a famine as punishment for Ahab's apostasy. God then had sent him to the impoverished Gentile widow in Sidon who would feed him. I think today's story about Ahab and Jezebel is meant to be read in comparison with the generous, trusting hospitality of the poor widow.

Ahab, a king living in a palace, desires to possess the vineyard of his poor subject Naboth because it is next to his country palace in Jezreel and would make the perfect kitchen vegetable garden. He makes Naboth an offer that sounds perfectly reasonable to our 21st century ears: "It's just land, a commodity – name your price or, if you prefer, I'll give you another vineyard that is even better." Sounds like a great deal to me – cash,

immediate closing and no brokerage fees! But Naboth refuses because it is his ancestral inheritance. Ahab sulks and takes to his bed because he can't get what he wants. Now his sociopathic wife Jezebel takes over. Ahab is acting like no king she knows. She'll show him what a king does, after all, her father is King of Sidon! So she hatches a plot for Naboth to be falsely accused of blasphemy and treason and convicted under the law and stoned to death outside the walls of the city. As Ahab goes to take possession of the vineyard which has been forfeited to the crown, he encounters Elijah who pronounces God's judgment upon him. Jezebel may have concealed her sins from the world, but not from God.

Ahab is convicted not just for the sins of Jezebel but for his own overreaching of his authority. A vineyard is used often in the Bible as a metaphor for the Promised Land given by God to his people. Naboth wouldn't sell because it came from that inheritance. He recognizes it for what it is – a gift from God that is not his to sell but only his to care for and to be nourished by it. Unlike Naboth and the poor widow of Sidon, Ahab doesn't recognize what God has given but greedily desires more. Unlike the widow, Ahab does not show any love for his neighbor.

In our reading from Galatians we hear Paul talk about the grace of God he found in Jesus Christ. Keeping all the laws by his own efforts built up in him a barrier, a wall, that prevented him from seeing that the faith of Christ demonstrates that God's grace, God's gift of being in right relationship with God, is unconditional and not conditional on anything we might do. This reverses the order of penitence and salvation. We don't earn right relationship with God by being penitential. Rather, when we accept the unconditional love of God, God's gift of the grace - of being accepted by

God, we are given the freedom and desire to live into the ethical life God calls us into.

We see this truth being acted out in our Gospel reading from Luke. Jesus is reclining at dinner in the Pharisee Simon's house when a woman who is a notorious sinner (probably a prostitute) arrives and makes quite a spectacle of herself by washing Jesus' feet with tears, wiping them with her hair and anointing them with valuable oil. Simon is appalled and wonders what kind of fake prophet this Jesus is if he can't tell what kind of person is fussing with his feet!

Jesus' parable to Simon about the creditor who cancelled unilaterally the debts owed by two debtors points to God's unconditional love and acceptance of us. God tears down the walls between God and us out of God's sheer abundance of love.

The unnamed woman has come to see and experience this through Jesus and responds accordingly with an abundance of gratitude and reciprocal love. But Simon the Pharisee doesn't get it. His self-reliance on keeping the law blinds him to the unconditional love of God sitting at his table. He can only see his righteousness under the law and the woman's sins. He can't see that God loves her unconditionally and is calling her into a better life.

Jesus hammers his point home when he contrasts Simon's behavior as a host with the woman's devotion. The Pharisee's failure to be able to see God's unconditional love has built a barrier, a wall, not only between God and himself but also between himself and this woman. He can only see a notorious sinner and not a child of God who has come to realize that she is

in right relationship with God. Jesus concludes this drama by telling the woman her sins are forgiven – thus directly challenging the Pharisee’s belief that under the Law sins can only be forgiven by sacrificial offerings made at the Temple in Jerusalem. Declaring her forgiveness restored her to the community.

We often hear people say “but we are all sinners in need of forgiveness.” It is usually a tag line that follows when someone has criticized and judged another person to be unfit or unchristian. Today we usually hear this after someone judges gay people or opposes recognition of their rights or relationships under the civil law. When I was growing up it often followed criticism of a woman who had a child out of wedlock no matter the circumstances. In my grandparents’ time it often followed mentioning someone who had been divorced – again, regardless of any circumstances - or a woman who sought the right to vote.

Perhaps our lesson from Luke tells us something about judging and how behind it lies a wall that we have built not only with others but also with the God who loves them also. When the civil unions bill first came up here in Hawaii, a group of ministers formed a group to oppose it and called themselves “the Wall Builders”. They were actually quite proud of that name. But if we look at this lesson from Luke and then view it in the context of Jesus’ life of radical hospitality and table fellowship, we’ll see that Jesus was not about building walls to separate us from God or from one another. Quite the opposite. In our Eucharistic prayer we’ll hear the words “He yearned to draw all the world to himself.”

Those words characterize Jesus’ life and ministry. He didn’t sit and wait for people to come to him. No! He was always out where the people were. He didn’t observe the purity code about whom he could eat a meal

with! No! He welcomed all to the table! Did you notice that our lesson ended with the names of the woman who travelled with and aided Jesus' ministry? That was a scandal! Jesus was not about to let social conventions about the appropriate place for women separate him from half of humanity!

Our lessons today offer the Church a lot to think about – not just Holy I. or the Episcopal Church – but all who are called to be the Body of Christ in today's world. AMEN>