

ASH WEDNESDAY

February 18, 2010

@*Flanders United Presbyterian Church/Flanders, NJ*
with Abiding Peace Lutheran Church/Budd Lake, NJ

Isaiah 58:1—12 2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10 ***Matthew 6:1—6, 16—21***

Let us pray: Gracious God, as we enter this season of Lent, we ask to walk more closely to you. Please guide us as we seek to strip away those things that keep us from being in closer relationship with you. Help us to be faithful in our Lenten discipline, so that we may grow in faith and love for your ultimate gift to us, your Son and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have a confession to make – I don't particularly care for tonight's appointed lesson from Matthew. To be perfectly honest, it really rubs my Lutheran sensibilities the wrong way. This is certainly not a text I would have chosen to preach on, had it not been appointed for us in the lectionary.

I understood what Jesus was saying to the disciples when he admonished them not to be like those who give alms, pray, or fast, in order that others may see them and appreciate their wonderful piety. I understood Jesus' point about the proper motivation for pious acts, as acts of worship directed toward God. We shouldn't concern ourselves with what others think, because our acts of devotion are about God, not people.

Where I get hung up on this text is when it says that you should do these things in secret, seemingly so that God will “reward” you.

Now perhaps you don’t bring the same baggage to this particular word – “reward” – that I do. But to me, the use of this word indicates that there is some sort of *quid pro quo* going on – you do for me, and I’ll do for you. You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.

All I can think of is that televangelist I sometimes see on TV at 2 a.m. You know the one I’m talking about... he’s the guy who says, “When you get on the phone right now and call my 800- number, and when you give to keep this very important ministry going, God will give back to you ten-fold. God wants you to be generous with your money, and when you are, God will bless you – He’ll reward you – for your generosity.”

This sort of theology I call “The Great God Vending Machine.” It’s the sort of theology that says if you push God’s buttons a certain way, you’ll get what you want. Or, as some televangelists say, if you write out your check, God will give back to you, and then some. That sort of theology just doesn’t fly for me. God can’t – and won’t – be manipulated.

So, yes, I have quite a bit of emotional and theological baggage when I see the word “reward” in scripture. As we know from the examples of the lives of the saints of the early church, to the life of Martin Luther, and all the way through the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., to people living today, the way of the cross is not one of temporal reward. The boldness to follow Christ has often led to suffering in this life. So how could Jesus say that if you give alms, pray, or fast in the right way – in secret, as today’s text tells us – that you would be “rewarded”? I just didn’t get it.

I find that when I'm having problems with a text like this one, it's usually because I haven't understood it appropriately. So, like a good little pastor, I do what I was taught to do in seminary: I go back to the original language of the text – Greek or Hebrew – in order that I might gain insight from word choice or grammar that somehow doesn’t come through in translation.

Any of you who have studied a foreign language know that, quite often, a word used in a foreign language doesn’t have a good English equivalent. Even our Bible translators sometimes have to accept the use of a word here and there that doesn’t quite match what was said in the original language.

As I sat at my desk this week agonizing over what I would say to you – and still very much disliking this text – I kept hearing the words of my Greek professor ringing in my head. He kept saying, “You’ve got to do the work. I can tell in the first three minutes of any sermon if you’ve learned anything while preparing to preach that sermon. So, you’ve got to do the work.”

So, feeling that I was wasting what was quickly becoming precious little time to write this sermon, I started translating anyway. I really didn’t expect to learn anything new from the translation.

You know, there’s a reason the church raises up certain pastors to be teachers in our seminaries – because they’re pretty good at what they do. They know what they’re talking about. And certainly in the case of this text, Dr. Carlson was right: I really needed to do the work.

You see, the word that our New Revised Standard Translation of the Bible – and many other translations – renders as “reward” isn’t “reward” at all. What the text really says, three times, is: “your Father who sees what is hidden *will give back to you.*”

“Will give back.” Those three little words make all the difference in the world to me. For what am I to merit a reward from God? As Luther said, “Oh, what do we poor muck-worms, maggots, stench, and filth presume to boast of before him who is the God and Creator of heaven and earth, who made us out of dirt and out of nothing! And as far as our nature, birth, and essence are concerned, we are but dirt and nothing in his eyes; all that we are and have comes from his grace and his rich mercy.”¹

I have a problem with supposed “rewards” from God for my good behavior. I don't think God operates that way. But, I don't have any problem with God giving something to me out of His abundant love.

With those three little words – “will give back” – everything that I had been struggling with about this text and how it relates to our Lenten discipline suddenly fell into place for me. I had been struggling with the notion of giving something up, or taking up a new discipline, during Lent, when we all know that we've already received the greatest gift God could ever give us – his precious Son. He's pure grace. What difference does some pious act on my part make in God's grand plan of grace? God loves me anyway, only on account of the gift of faith in Jesus that He has given me.

This is where it all began to make sense to me. Sure, my acts of devotion and piety don't make God love me any more. But I do receive something in return. In this Lenten season, as I try to strip away all those things that distract me from being about the business of being in proper relationship to God and therefore, with others, the gift I get back is a deeper and closer relationship to God. As I reduce all the background noise in my life, I can better hear that still, small voice of the Holy Spirit that continually calls to me, calling me into a deeper life of devotion and discipleship. As I seek to eliminate or reduce those things that have prevented me from drawing as close to God as God and I would like, I am "rewarded" with a greater sense of God's presence and activity in my life.

So, here's the lesson I learned from preparing this sermon for you today. I hope it's something that will help you in your journey through Lent as well. ***There are no short-cuts when it comes to being in relationship with God.*** Those who have received the gift of faith in God's gracious gift of Jesus Christ are called not simply to receive the gift of release from sin and eternal life. They are also called to be in relationship with the living God who seeks to love and guide us in the here and now.

But we've got to do the work. Our Lenten discipline calls us to concentrate on stripping away those things that have hindered us from being in closer relationship with God. Whether it be prayer, fasting, devotions, or any of a host of other disciplines, the proper motivation for Lenten discipline is to strengthen our relationship with God.

When we offer our Lenten discipline as an act of worship to God, we are given far better a reward than anything we could receive from fellow human beings. We're given the gift of walking side by side with God. There's no one I'd rather have by my side. How about you?

Amen.

<1,556 words>

¹Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works, Vol 47: The Christian in Society*. J.J. Pelikan, H.C. Oswald & H.T. Lehmann, Editors (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 144.