

The God of Extremes

In the name of him who in love has revealed the Father to us, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel reading we heard again the very comforting invitation of our Lord Jesus to come to him for *rest*. In our invariably fast paced and hectic modern lives you have to admit it's an invitation that sounds pretty good. I'm sure we all have those days (and maybe weeks and months) when we say, "I sure could use a break."

Anyway, lifted out of its broader context the way we heard it, you might get the impression that when Jesus made this offer, he was addressing a large audience of weary and careworn refugees who had come to him for aid. That's the scene you might conjure up in your mind's eye, anyway; but that would be wrong. The truth is that other than his immediate disciples very few people heard him say it.

How do I know? Well, it turns out that Jesus spoke the words of this morning's text after he had sent his twelve disciples out on what most people would consider to be a failed evangelism campaign. He had sent them forward armed with the Good News of the Kingdom and the power to perform miracles of healing and the casting out of demons. Their job was to go to the towns and villages that Jesus would soon visit and lay the groundwork for Jesus' own arrival. And so, the disciples went out and did it—or they tried to anyway. They didn't get much of a response. Oh, they drew some interest: mostly rubberneckers and thrill seekers who paid attention long enough to see what the commotion was about, but who then didn't care for what they heard, lost interest, and went back to their normal business. So, the disciples returned to Jesus somewhat disappointed. The overall result of their mission was underwhelming to say the least.

And apparently, they brought back a complaint from the people they encountered. They were saying that John the Baptist had been too severe. With him it was all hellfire and brimstone. Discipleship under John meant fasting and prayer, deep sorrow over sin, and denying yourself life's creature comforts. He made it too hard to be a disciple. Jesus, on the other hand, they said was too easy. "Why, he and his followers attend wedding feasts, and parties are thrown in Jesus' honor—at which they all drink wine freely! Can you believe it? And they hang out with all kinds of scoundrels and low lives. What kind of supposed men of God do those things?"

So, the people's assessment was that in a spiritual sense the burden John laid on them was too heavy and the burden of Jesus too light. What they wanted was a form of religion that Goldilocks could have appreciated: one that was just right. Neither too hard nor too soft; not too hot or cold; just sort of lukewarm. They wanted a spiritual burden that made them work *some*, that is, they wanted it to be heavy enough that they could have a sense of accomplishment and the satisfaction that goes with it without it being too difficult. And for that reason, they rejected both the message of John and Jesus.

And Jesus takes them to task for it. In the passage that immediately precedes the words of this morning's text, Jesus pronounces a series of frightful warnings and woes on the people who lived in the places where so many of his mighty miracles had been performed. According to Jesus the wonders they saw should have confirmed the authority of his message. Seeing the hand of God at work in his ministry and that of his disciples should have proved the divine origin of his words. But no; the prevailing conventional wisdom about what true faithfulness to the Lord consists of, namely that – what shall we call it? That "medium heavy" yoke of spirituality – the way of faithfulness that calls me to

do *some* but *not too much* – the desire for that kind of a religion overrode and negated the teaching of Jesus and his invitation to find forgiveness and spiritual rest in him. And that, sadly, is the way most people saw it. And on account of it they missed out on the salvation he came to bring.

But rather than be disappointed himself about the meager results of his ministry to date, what we heard in this morning's text is Jesus giving thanks to his heavenly Father for the comparatively few who did respond. "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

There are a couple things worth mentioning here. First, that Jesus is clearly an optimist. Rather than see the glass as almost empty, he is thankful for the little that it does contain. And it reminds us of how he said that angels in heaven rejoice over even one sinner who comes to repentance and faith. It suggests that we should think the same way – that we who tend to measure success in terms of numbers should focus instead on individuals.

Secondly, a lot of theological debate swirls around the question of why some people come to faith in Jesus and his Gospel and others consistently reject it. And though we don't have the full answer given here, we are at least given some insight into the mystery. The truth of God, Jesus says, has been hidden from the wise and understanding. Not only do they not get it; they can't. It's been obstructed from their view. And of course, Jesus is referring here to people who possess the wisdom and understanding of the world. And part of what's blinding them is their own purported wisdom. Humans have by nature a tendency to think of and describe God in terms of what they want him (or her) to be. And what we want is that God of the middle way: a God who in general rewards those who do good and punishes those who do evil; but who isn't too extreme about anything. We want a God who can be bargained with, who will bless us or answer our prayers in exchange for favors that we can perform for him. We want a God who approves our own moral agendas, who lets me determine what's right or wrong for my happiness and just sort of rubberstamps my choices. We want a God who is open to all religious ideas that people might come up with, who doesn't really care *how* he's worshipped or *what* people call him; but who happily accepts any effort to reach out to him and every noble aspiration of the human spirit to find him. And most of all we want a God who approves of *me*, who looks down from heaven above and sees that I'm trying the best I can to please him by carrying this "medium heavy" yoke for him, and who will reward me accordingly. This is the sort of God human wisdom and understanding comes up with. And this vision of *what people think God should be* blocks their view of the real McCoy.

To whom does God reveal himself and his truth then? Jesus says, "to little children". The actual word he uses refers to infants and toddlers. And what, we might ask, is it about them that makes them able to see what the wise and understanding can't? Let me suggest several things. First, they have no preconceived notions about who God is or how he operates. They are in total reception mode, accepting without doubt whatever the Lord chooses to reveal of himself. They don't have a false god of their own imagination blocking their view. Second, they have a strong sense of wonder. For the infant everything is new and fascinating. There is delight in the simplest of things and joy in repetition. What seems mindless monotony to an adult is the source of endless entertainment to a child. That's why they can hear the same story a hundred times and still beg to hear it again. Finally, they are completely dependent. They have no sense that they can carry a part of the load for themselves; rather they themselves must be carried.

They depend on others for everything: food, clothing, shelter, cleansing, love – they can't do anything for themselves. And they know it.

And so, it is to infants and to those who possess these qualities of infants that the Lord reveals himself. They're the only ones who can see him. And what he reveals is that he's not the god of the middle way. He's the God of extremes. He's extremely powerful, wise, and holy. He's an absolute perfectionist. He's very particular about who comes into his presence and how. He cannot be bargained with. His moral code is inflexible. His fury over your sin is as hot as hellfire and his mercy and forgiveness for you in Jesus is as cold and refreshing as a glacier fed mountain stream. That's what the Lord was revealing of himself through the starkly contrasting ministries of John and Jesus. John showed the way of God's law. Through John he demonstrated that there's no happy medium with the law: if try to carry any of it, you must carry all of it; and so anyone who tries to approach the Lord by that path will find himself staggering under a burden far too heavy to bear. This was God's purpose in giving the law to sinners: to place us under its crushing weight precisely so that we'd cry out for and welcome with gratitude the relief that we hear Jesus offer today.

And welcome it we do for this is our Father's gracious will. It was his good and gracious will to place our extreme load of guilt on his Son. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "It pleased the Lord to crush him" which he did for our sakes when he carried the infinitely heavy yoke of the cross to Golgotha. It's God's gracious will that you see him there on the cross so that you know how extreme his love for you is, and so that you find the ultimate rest he grants to your soul. It's God's gracious will that you receive this gift as an infant in perfect trust, complete wonder, and total dependency. The best picture I can come up with is little birds in the nest. You know how they are when they're only a few days old: they've got that fuzz on top of their heads instead of feathers that makes them look like little dandelions, and they're swaying back and forth, all mouth and eyes, and chirping away like crazy hoping that the mother bird will place the next bite of food in their mouths. That's how we ought to approach the Lord. That's how we ought to come to worship. That's how we ought to hear and receive his Word. And that's how we ought to come to Holy Communion – I like that part of the picture especially because it's precisely through the eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood that we experience his extreme forgiveness and receive perfect rest for our souls.

So, what's the upshot of all this? Two things: first that we recognize in ourselves the tendency to want to water down our understanding of the Lord and try to fit him into the mold of our own preferences and imagination. That's not the way to do it. To know him as he is, we need to be on the receiving end of his revelation. When we do that, we discover that he is a God who reveals himself to us in extremes and stark contrasts. Let's avoid the temptation to smudge his image or try to find gray where he has given us black and white. And for where we have been guilty of any of this, let's repent and receive his forgiveness.

And secondly, let's apply these truths to our own evangelism and outreach efforts. Like the disciples, we've been sent out to prepare individuals – one at a time – to receive the Lord Jesus. Knowing that they have a false perception, let's make sure that from us they get a corrected portrait – one that presents all the extremes of God – that they may come to know him as he is, rightly tremble at his wrath over sin, and so welcome and receive the peace and perfect rest that he gives freely in Christ Jesus our Lord. And then with then and the angels of heaven we will all rejoice. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!