

Sermon Preached on  
Third Sunday in Lent  
(February 28, 2016)

"Remembrance"

In our bible study last Thursday, we ran into a tough - and frustrating - passage from Hebrews. In it, the author talks of the Hebrew people during their time in the wilderness following Moses.

Because of their sin, they are not allowed to enter the promised land.

The author was hinting, "Don't be like them - or else." It felt like manipulation. One of our members said, "This is how cults control their members - by threats of punishment."

Well, although cults do indeed employ many of those tactics, the letter to the Hebrews is a little different. It's repeating stories of the Old Testament, stories written down centuries after the fact. They were written in part to explain why certain things happened, and you'll find examples of this kind of story in every culture around the world. Why did the Hebrews wander for 40 years? Because they made God angry. It certainly couldn't be because they didn't know anything about being a nation or had no idea where they were going.

Paul, of course, is telling newer, threatening stories, and it's difficult to see how what he's doing is anything other than manipulative. 23,000 killed for sexual immorality? By God? Really?

In fairness to Paul, it has been argued that this section is just badly written: Before it, he is describing how Christians have freedoms heretofore unknown such as eating meat dedicated to idols (since idols are nothing). In the section following, he says the warning is to not take their liberty too far. Fine. But the fact remains, he uses threats of punishment by God, and he does so because in his day, people talk like this - it is surely a model of his time. We explain bad things that happen by blaming it on God - then we use that fear to control behavior. Just as we discussed in the bible study.

Well, what Paul describes may be a model of his time, but it is not a model of God. What Jesus shows us in today's gospel is a different understanding of punishment - though it might not seem like it at first blush.

Let's review. Some people came to Jesus and told him about Galileans who whose blood had been mingled with sacrifices. This was supposed to be a horrible scandal - mixing blood with sacrifices would make them eternally unclean, unacceptable to God. Not unlike the recently told apocryphal story of General Pershing dipping bullets in pigs' blood and then executing Muslim prisoners so they could never enter heaven. (to which a Muslim cleric said something to the effect, "The bullets would bother us, but the pigs' blood would have no effect").

Now, you might be thinking that there's nothing wrong with reporting an atrocity such as this. Jesus would want to know, right? But based on his reaction, they were not simply reporting. They were gloating. They were saying, "Oooh, they were especially bad!" They were saying that the manner of their death changed them in the eyes of God. God had punished them but good.

Who knows what they hoped would be Jesus' reaction. Perhaps they were trying to get him to see that all this "Love and forgiveness" stuff he kept preaching had its limits after all. That sometimes, people were just so bad that they needed eternal damnation. But Jesus turns the tables on them. He says that they are no better than those who died – either those whose blood was mingled with sacrifices or those upon whom the tower of Siloam fell. [By the way, nobody knows for sure the significance of the Tower of Siloam. It's possible that it was being built by Pilate, but collapsed during construction - which many would have seen as a sign of God's anger. But that is only an educated guess.] The important thing is that people had seen these events as God's punishment - and Jesus rejects that.

Throughout his Gospels, and reiterated here, Jesus is not interested in God's punishment for sins. Jesus is interested in how we relate to God and each other. Not the specifics but the attitude. Do we look to God in love or resentment? Do we treat each other with love – or contempt? When those people came to gloat over these supposed impure deaths, Jesus reiterates what he says elsewhere: the refusal to love, the desire to condemn others - that is what separates us from God. God is love, and about the only condition that is not compatible with God is lack of love.

So, in the Lenten season, when we are called upon to examine our lives, our actions, our interactions with others and with God. Ask yourself this: Are my actions loving? It is irrelevant about whom you're talking. Ask yourself, "Am I acting in love?" Or am I expressing contempt?

I don't know what happens even to the most hateful, contemptible people. Perhaps there is no eternal punishment for them any more than for us. If there's anything this lesson teaches us, however, it's that this is none of my business. Punishment by God cannot be a factor in anything I do. My job - and I am the only person I can control - is to love even those who do not, who will not love others. And frankly, that's enough to work on for a lifetime. Amen.