

June 7, 2015

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

***"THE GREENER GRASS SYNDROME"***

by Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

1 Samuel 8:4-20 ~ Mark 3:20-35

One night when I was serving the church in Nekoosa, I was driving back from the hospital in Marshfield where a beloved member of the congregation lay dying. I had spent the majority of my day at the bedside with the members of her family and it had been both beautiful and tragic ... a day filled with tears and laughter. That was during the time when I was driving back and forth to Chicago each week to complete both my master's thesis and my MDiv degree. I was weary with the weight of the church and the seminary when the thought occurred to me to just keep on driving - past my exit, past Kansas City, past Dallas, all the way to Mexico. I didn't, of course. I stayed my course and came back home as usual, but I did share the story ... and of all the sermons I've preached here and there in the last ten years, that story seems to have connected with the most people because that story has been repeated back to me more often than any other. Because I suppose it's universal. "Life is difficult," as Scott Peck reminds us, and we might as well accept it. In fact, Peck says, until we accept it, we can never be healthy people.

We all have problems. And we all have times we would like to run away. Most of us don't ... and those who do usually discover that they have carried their problems with them. We all have our own challenges, and it is how we respond to these challenges that leads to growth and good character ... or to patterns of dysfunction and chronic flaws.

We want ... we expect ... God to help with our problems, but God doesn't always do what we want. Usually, rather than removing our problems, God is with us *in* our problems so that we might grow by overcoming them. But we want an easier way. I was reminiscing the other day about the time I took our daughter to the circus when she was four. Mary Cate wanted the toy sword with a flashlight handle that they were selling at the circus, and I refused. I think after all the cotton candy and peanuts and hotdogs I perhaps had run out of indulgence, but I also didn't think it was appropriate for a four year old to have a sword, and it was too expensive for such poor quality. Thus, to protect her brother from being beaten about the head ... and to teach her that she can't have everything she wants just because she wants it ... I said no. In fact, I had to say no over and over. She was insistent. And she was angry. In endless bargaining she refused to accept my reasons why she didn't really need what she wanted. I told her the toy was poorly made. I told her I didn't want her playing with toy weapons. I pointed out all the other toys she had. Finally I resorted to "Because I said so, that's why!" - a parent's last line of defense. She wouldn't accept that either. We didn't enjoy much of the circus that day. Instead, we had a long battle (without swords!) I never relented. Neither did she. I felt pretty good about myself for standing my ground. Truth be told, we did a lot of standing that afternoon because when I got to

the parking lot I realized that I had locked my keys in the car. That did very little to add to my credibility as a wise parent.

But as I reminisced about that day I couldn't help but think that that's what we do with God. When we ask God to do something we want ... and God doesn't do it ... we won't accept no for an answer. We try to get what we want somewhere else. We try to find a god who will do it for us. Thus, idolatry is born out of childish impatience because of our disappointment with ... and lack of trust in ... the wisdom of God.

You remember the old story about the man who asks his friend for a loan? The friend says no, and the man responds angrily "Then you're no friend of mine!" And the friend says, "Wait a minute. Didn't I block for you when you were a running back in high school?" "Yeah." "And didn't I introduce you to my girlfriend who is now your wife?" "Yeah." "And didn't I stay up all night with you to study so you could pass your college Algebra class?" "Yeah." "And didn't I co-sign the loan for your first house?" "Yeah." "Then how can you say I'm no friend of yours?" The man thought a moment and answered, "Well, what have you done for me lately?"

God had liberated the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. God had led them through the wilderness, fed them, instructed them, made them a people. God brought them into the land of promise, a land flowing with milk and honey and delivered them from their enemies. And how did the people respond? "What have you done for us lately, God? We don't want to trust in you. Faith is too hard. We want a King like all the nations around us. Their Kings lead them and protect them and take care of all their problems. We want a King, and then we can be a strong nation like they are ... maybe even a world-ruling empire someday."

They asked Samuel to anoint a King of God's choosing. Samuel had been leading them as a prophet and judge, but without the absolute imperial authority of a King. Now Samuel was old and his children unreliable. Eli's children had been the same way, but somehow the obvious danger of creating a royal dynasty escaped the Hebrew's awareness. "We want a King!" the people said. "You won't like a King," Samuel warned them. "The King will take your land, your goods, your children from you and do as he pleases." "We want a King!" the people said. "God is your King!" Samuel answered, "The only ruler you can trust to know what is best and do what is best for you." "We want a King!" the people said. And finally, God relented. "Don't feel bad, Samuel," God said. "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being their sovereign."

There is an old Arab proverb: *"Better a handful of dry dates and content therewith ... than to own the Gate of Peacocks and be kicked in the eye by a broody camel."* But we are not skilled in the fine art of contentment. We lose our perspective. God has given us so much ... taken care of us ... given us resources and education and opportunities shared by few in the history of humankind ... families and friends and church and community and nation ... none of them perfect but all of them blessings. And how do we respond? "What have you done for us lately, God? It isn't enough. It isn't perfect. If only you would take care of this problem, if only you would give me this thing, then I would be content." Discontented, we look to some other god ... we search for a great national leader ... we worship some celluloid saint ... we put all our faith in family or fame or some other low-performing god in the hopes that we'll get what we want.

For the Hebrews, it was a King. They wanted security over faith ... organization over trust ... the protection of authority over the responsibility of freedom. And God relented to their stubborn will. And they suffered the consequences of their foolishness.

In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan tells his saintly brother Aloysha the story of "The Grand Inquisitor." In Seville, Spain, at the height of the Inquisition, Jesus himself returns and raises a little girl from the dead. He is, of course, immediately imprisoned. The Grand Inquisitor comes to visit him in the prison, but Jesus is silent. He accuses Jesus of making humanity miserable with the freedom he offered ... which the church has finally eradicated after fifteen centuries so that humanity can be happy. For what makes people happy, according to the Grand Inquisitor, are precisely the three temptations which Jesus refused: miracle, mystery, and authority. Miracle solves their problems for them and fills their hunger. Mystery removes their need to think for themselves. And authority gives them the sense of security and unity and dependency they want. "*All that (humanity) seeks on earth,*" says the Inquisitor, is "*someone to worship, someone to keep (its) conscience, and some means of uniting all in one harmonious ant heap....*" He reveals to Jesus the secret that the church has joined "the other side" in order to offer these things for the happiness of humanity. In other words, says the Grand Inquisitor, the church is simply giving the people what they want. He threatens to have Jesus burned at the stake the next day. But when the Grand Inquisitor gets no reply from Jesus but a kiss, he lets him go, his heart touched but his mind *unchanged*.

Dostoyevsky has been hailed as one of the great psychological writers of modern times. Is he right about us? Are we satisfied with what God offers us in Christ? Do we trust Jesus to provide what we need, even if it doesn't match everything we want? Or do we want miracles, mystery, and authority ... some King, symbolic or real ... to make everything easy for us at the cost of our dignity, intelligence, and freedom? And will we welcome Jesus as he is, with all the insecurity and uncertainty and effort that following him in freedom requires ... or will we have warm admiration in our hearts for him without letting him change our minds? Are we truly grateful for all that God has done for us in Christ? Do we really want what God wants for us - and nothing more? And will we make Christ, and Christ alone, our sovereign after all?

The lesson in this story is clear to me. First, be careful what you ask for because God might let you have it. Second, trust in God above everything else to give you what you need because any other god will fail you ... and any other sovereign will enslave you. And third, what you ask of God should flow from your gratitude for what God has already given you. Praise God from whom all blessings flow, even the blessings disguised as our problems. That's the sermon I see here today. May we pray?

God grant us the serenity to change the things we can, to accept the things we can't, and the wisdom to know the difference. For what we are about to receive, make us truly grateful. And help us to trust you more, for Jesus' sake. Amen.