

Just Rite or Just Right?

October 6, 2019

Pastor Judy Bangsund

Dear Friends, I greet you in Jesus' name.

Some of you are aware that I do Jail Ministry. Generally, that means 1-1 chaplain visits with interested inmates. Sometimes I pair with another volunteer chaplain to lead a Bible study. I love interacting with these women in both of these ways. At the moment, I have the added joy of preparing a young woman for baptism. She is an evangelist at heart, and has already been instrumental in 9 decisions for Christ. She is learning by leaps and bounds and it is truly a privilege to teach her.

Last week she shared with me something of the mindset of the younger women that she interacts with. "This younger generation is afraid of religion," she explained. "They are afraid of the list of things they might have to do, and of what might happen if they don't do those things. So they just stay away from religion. But it isn't about religion!" She exclaimed. "It's about relationship!" And she's so right! She nailed it!

As you know, we are in the midst of a 6-week series on the book of Jeremiah. Last week Pastor Jonna shared about your calling: service to others in Jesus' name. Taking up your cross to follow him, and all that that might mean. Two weeks ago, Pastor Jim laid the groundwork for us, explaining that Jeremiah had begun his work as a young man in the time of good King Josiah, who had found a book of the Law (likely the book of Deuteronomy). It was an exciting find. Josiah instituted a series of reforms and the people began to offer sacrifices and observe the Passover, among other things.

All was good – at first. But then, as time passed, Jeremiah saw that although religious observance had spiked, it was only lip service. Lives had not changed. There was still corruption, idols and disharmony among the people. In short, their relationship with God had remained untouched. You see, the people had gotten the notion that as long as the Temple was in their midst, they were safe. God would not allow any disaster to reach them as long as the Temple stood.

But they couldn't be more wrong. For God, it's not about a building or about ritual practices. These things were only markers for the *relationship* God wanted between himself and his people. Without that relationship, their *religion* meant nothing. And now, as we read in Jeremiah 7, God is ready to start a "reform" of his own a radical one: to destroy the Temple, the city of Jerusalem, sending the people into exile. He is very serious about this, and the chapter is pretty grim. Let's take a look.

God has searched the hearts of his people and found only rebellion and obstinance – twin characteristics of sin, that inward curvature of the self which describes "sin" so well. (Have you

noticed the letter “I” in the center of the word, “sIn”?) When we are stubborn about doing things our own way, we naturally turn against God’s way. We turn in on ourselves, rather than to open up to God. God’s phrase is “hardened hearts.” And like parents who fear for a child who is making really bad decisions, God is furious. You know what I mean? “Why were you hanging out with *those* kids? What were you doing in *that* place? Don’t you know it’s dangerous?” And your fear for your child’s safety and well-being turns into anger. What we might call “righteous anger.”

God has again and again sent prophets and warnings. He sent them a good king who had recovered God’s Law. He has blessed his people with prosperity, only to have that boomerang into complacency towards God. Again and again, the people have turned away from God, and every time they harden their hearts a little more, until they are like stone. Now “faithfulness is nowhere to be found.” And this is the crux of the matter. The people are unfaithful. They are lacking faith entirely. God’s description of “the stubborn inclinations of their own wicked hearts” is reminiscent of God’s language at the time of the Flood. Remember?

When the LORD saw how great the wickedness of human beings was on earth, and how every desire that their heart conceived was always nothing but evil, the LORD regretted making human beings on the earth, and his heart was grieved. (Genesis 6:5-6)

“...every desire ... was always nothing but evil.” Pretty bleak. Sin has its consequences. God says to Jeremiah, “I will put an end to the sounds of joy and gladness... the whole land will become a desolate wasteland.” And that’s how the chapter ends.

Getting the religious rituals right is just not enough. Lip service alone will not cut it. Now, rituals can be very beautiful and quite meaningful – don’t get me wrong. Doing the “r-i-t-e” thing is not a bad thing. Rites and rituals have a way of binding us together, of reminding us in a very concise way of our core beliefs. The Rite of Baptism – very important. Or of Confirmation or Marriage. These carry meaning and are central activities in our faith. The little rituals we do – sharing the peace, for example – can be meaningful if we know why we do them. But if these things become the “Thing Itself,” instead of a means to a much greater reality, we have *more* than missed the point. We have missed the relationship.

People today are wary of religion, and I can understand that. Religion can so easily devolve into religiosity – a kind of transaction with God. In Jeremiah’s day it might be offering certain sacrifices or observing certain holy days – in order to get on God’s good side. To stack up credit with God, so that at the end of the day, he would bless them. Transaction. Manipulation. And some people try to use religion that way today. For some: a duty to be done – and then you are good to go. For others: go to church on Sunday, get forgiven, and then it doesn’t matter what you do... right? (Think of the odd and disquieting interplay in the Godfather movies between church and mafia.) Paul found the same mentality in his day, when people figured, the more I sin

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the more God shows his grace. And since grace is good, I should sin more! Well, no. In Romans 6, Paul comes down hard on this kind of thinking – “You have died to sin,” he cries out. “How can you live in it? Wallow in it? God has set you free; why put yourself back into bondage?” You and I are no different. And the thing is, when our religion becomes just rites, we not only lose the relationship, but the world sees us for what we are. *Hypocrites!* they cry. *There’s really no difference between them and us, after all.*

So rites on their own are not enough; in fact, they can be *false premises* – foundations that just don’t hold up. Rather, God calls us into a real relationship with him, one in which he offers *true promises*, to transform us by his Holy Spirit and create in us something entirely new. People who desire to do his will, not just those who speak the words right. God wants our relationship with him to be *just right*, not *just rites*. Right relationship with God, from which real worship results. As Jesus told the woman at the well, worship has nothing to do with a building or a location, but rather, turning to God in spirit and in truth.

You see, being “just right” with God never starts with us. The initiative is always with God. He is the faithful one. When Moses went up the mountain for the Law, God passed by him and made himself known saying, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” Yes, there are consequences to sin. But *forgiveness is real*. And the God who calls us into relationship with him is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. *That is the very nature of God*. And because we are sinners, caught in a web of sin and unable to free ourselves, it is a tremendous gift to be set free – all because of God’s love. Such a gift causes us to be utterly grateful, such that new desires take root within – transforming us to be more like Christ. *Then we worship as Paul tells us in Colossians: forgiven and forgiving, compassionate as we have experienced compassion, full of peace, God’s word taking up its dwelling—not in a building, but in our hearts. Then we will want to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in our hearts to God, with gratitude filling us up and spilling over. This is the true worship Jesus described – right worship, not worship rites. It’s what God wants for his people – then and now. It’s about relationship; a right relationship with God which works to transform us into something altogether new.*

So what happened to Jeremiah and the people who gave only lip service to God? It did not end well. They did not listen; they did not repent; and destruction and exile followed. It was, indeed, a grim time. But even in the midst of that despair, even as the city was falling down about their ears, Jeremiah writes again. We find it in the very center of the book of Lamentations – so-called because the Temple was being destroyed, and Jerusalem was being leveled by fire, even as their king and leaders were being led away into exile.

In the midst of this tragedy, Jeremiah turns from lament to surprising hope. Listen to the contrast as, at first, Jeremiah grieves the destruction:

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My soul is bereft of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, "Gone is my glory, and my expectation from the LORD." Remember my affliction and my bitterness, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. (Lamentations 3:19-20)

Such despair! But then faith raises its sweet voice and Jeremiah continues:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." (Lamentations 3:21-24)

My friends, I don't know where you are today. Perhaps you are one who leans more towards religiosity and just rites – paying lip service but not really changed. If this is the case, God is calling you to repent – turn around– and ask God's forgiveness. Enter into a new relationship with him. Or, if you are in a place where your world is falling apart all around you, then turn to God knowing that his grace is still there. His mercies have not come to an end. They are new every morning. God is great; and his faithfulness knows no bounds.

The woman I visit in jail was so right. Religion can be scary – if it is only a list of do's and don'ts; if it is, finally, hypocrisy in which there is no difference between us and them. But God doesn't want that for you; he wants to be your Father. He wants to be your God, your Lord and Savior. He is after your heart – a real relationship – from which true worship results. And then indeed, there will be – not an end – but a beginning to the "sounds of joy and gladness" as together we praise God for his faithfulness.