

8th Sunday After Pentecost Proper 12

July 26, 2010

the Rev. Ken Kroohs

(Genesis 18:20-32; Ps. 138; Collossians 2:6-19; Luke 11:1-13)

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St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, High Point, NC

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH ... AND THE MEDITATIONS OF ALL OUR HEARTS  
... BE ALWAYS ACCEPTABLE TO YOU --- OUR STRENGTH AND OUR REDEEMER  
AMEN

Today we had some really fun scriptures. You can hear Paul's frustration and even anger in his letter to the Colossians. Apparently someone had been arguing against Paul by using philosophy and downright deceit! In contrast Paul says they are to continue to live their lives focused on Jesus and established in faith.

Paul's 'enthusiasm' grows throughout the passage and I can imagine him shouting when we get to: *"Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not hold fast to the head - Jesus"*

No human being has the God given right to disqualify us - to declare we are not Christian.

In today's society with people claimng "we are in and you are out" ... I find Paul's teaching very comforting. .... One time when someone said something like: *"I am not*

*afraid of judgement day, are you?" My response was "I find great comfort in knowing you will not be on my jury!"*

This section of Colossians can be a bit dense, difficult to read, but it is well worth another look. And when you do read it, do so through the perspective that Paul probably wrote this from a Roman prison as he awaited likely death.

Today's other passages are even more full. When we read this part of Genesis, and then a gospel we are reading what was probably one of the first parts of the Bible to be composed, and one of the last. The Bible was composed – I am not saying 'written' because most likely much of the earliest material was first shared as verbal stories before people could read and write ---- The Bible was composed over at least a thousand year period – probably more. The oldest parts date to at least 1000 BC and the youngest was written about 100 AD. So in reading Genesis and a Gospel we are reading scripture from either end of the that time line ... some of the oldest and the youngest. (Of course 'youngest' is now almost 2,000 years old!)

I am fascinated by the changes in perspective between the oldest and youngest. There are a couple or three very important differences between the way God is described in Genesis and the way God is described in the Gospels but the one I want to highlight today is the focus on community,

verses the focus on the individual.

People have lots of fun with Abraham negotiating with God! The Jewish focus on decisions by a 'minyan' - a group of 10 men, probably dates to this passage. I want to call out is the acceptance that the whole village would be punished for the sins of a few. And, conversely, the whole village could be protected by the righteousness of the few.

With few exceptions, including Abraham, the Old Testament focus is on the "chosen people" - the group and not on 'righteous individuals'. But even with Abraham the focus is on the creation of the 'chosen people'. Over and over again we read about the Jewish people being punished, or protected as a group with no mention of individual responsibility.

As Americans we have been taught that everything is about individual rights. Growing up in this society we don't realize how different 'western' culture, especially American, is from most other cultures. In the middle east today the extended family and even the tribe or clan are extremely important. They are important enough that a person can sincerely believe the value of the clan is more important than an individual's value. It would be much more difficult to recruit suicide bombers in a society focused on the importance of the individual.

We find a very different perspective in the New Testament. In this passage from Luke Jesus says "every**one** who asks receives, every**one** who searches finds, for every**one** who knocks the door will be opened. EveryONE. In the Old Testament you are much less likely to hear this perspective.

Please understand that I do not believe God changed. And I do not fully understand the reason for the differences although you can have real fun debating it! I suspect it is more a change in focus than a true change. Mr. Spock of Star Trek fame would have understood the Old Testament focus: *"the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one."*

Jesus does not ignore that, but He does place it in a more personal context. Jesus says we are to love our neighbors, that we are to be servants of all. In other words, the needs of the others out weighs our needs. .... Not a teaching we accept easily or completely!

And watch how that re-appears, plus much more, in the Lord's Prayer. We begin by honoring and glorifying God: "Hallowed be your name" - I honor and glorify God.

Then "Your kingdom come" ... if we were honest we probably would not say this line! If we were honest we

would admit we don't want to be in a society where the needs of the others out weigh my needs. A society were I love my neighbor, and even my enemy. Where my physical pleasures are not all that important. If we are honest - we want God's kingdom after our death but we would just as soon focus on ourselves for now!

"Give us this day our daily bread" - not a 12 oz. steak with a fine wine. Just our daily bread. Just what we need, not what we want.

"forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone indebted to us" - that is a major discussion all by itself! But in summary I do not believe this is a trade-off, "If I forgive other people God will forgive me". Rather I believe it is about **accepting** God's forgiveness. Really feeling God's forgiveness. Really believing in God's forgiveness. Only if we have truly and sincerely forgiven another person can we understand God truly and sincerely forgiving us.

"Do not bring us to the time of trial" - or "put us to the time of trail". I do not believe this says God creates problems for us to test us. I don't believe that at all but I believe it is a plea that we be guided away from problems.

Jesus goes on to tell a story and teach about prayer. I believe He is trying to help us understand what he meant

in the Lord's prayer.

The story is about persistence and frankly bothers me. It sounds as if Jesus is saying that if you annoy God enough your prayers will be answered. And maybe if we flip it upside down that is what Jesus is saying. Remember the line "your kingdom come" – maybe what Jesus is suggesting is that if we keep praying for something, with an open mind remember, we will get what we truly need even if it is not what we asked for.

That I think is the focus in "ask and it will be given you" .... At first pass that sounds like the TV preacher saying he has prayed to God for a million dollars and God will provide – by each of you viewers sending in a hundred dollars!

In one Bible study many years ago we all agreed to pray for one week for a red sports car. None of our prayers were answered, except for the wise guy who brought in a toy! – Not me that time.

We might understand by going further down in the teaching: "*if a child asks for a fish, will you give them a snake instead*"? "*If then you who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*"

Allow me to link this with the Colossians teaching. Remember it said: "*see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy or empty deceit.*" I suspect that what Paul is driving at is exactly how some people read this Gospel – that we control God. That if we just pray with the right words and enough enthusiasm, that red sports car WILL appear in our driveway.

Notice the focus in that interpretation – our wants. Not even our needs but our wants. And yet Jesus taught us to pray only for our daily bread.

So is God telling us to live under a bridge, walk everywhere and never go on vacation? I don't think so because we also have the very comforting teaching about the tithe. That we are to give 10% to help build God's kingdom. Yes, we are to pray only for what we need, but the tithe suggests God allows us to enjoy the remainder. That God is not expecting a vow of poverty from each of us.

The critical point is that no matter how much we ask, God will NEVER give us something which will ultimately hurt us, no matter how often and hard we ask! I have heard it said: "sometimes the answer to my prayers is – 'think again'" I believe it was CS Lewis who said the line "lead us not into temptation" means please do NOT give us what is

bad for us!

Then Jesus seems to make a major jump. He is talking about how God will not give us something bad and jumps into a quick mention of the Holy Spirit. That is the end of this discussion since in the next verse Luke begins on a totally different day and place.

Sometimes looking back and simplifying helps us understand. Sometimes we are too focused on details. So in summary, here Jesus tells us we will get whatever we want as long as it does not hurt us and helps build God's kingdom .... and will send, by sending?, the Holy Spirit.

After pondering that for a while, and there may be other implications, I suspect here "the Holy Spirit" is being used as shorthand for "being in right relationship with God". Later Jesus tells us He will send the Holy Spirit to teach us all things ... to teach us what is best for us, to teach us what will build up God's kingdom. That would mean one of our primary prayers should be for clarity and wisdom.

BUT – what about getting anything I ask for? .... Let me pose a question – going deeper and deeper into ourselves what is it we really want? ..... I suggest to you that at the heart of it all we want to be happy, and satisfied, and feel like we made a difference through our lives. You might phrase it differently but I suspect it is something similar.

And that is exactly what God promises! To give us, or guide us may be a better phrase, to guide us to what we **truly** want.

As I write this I have a fear and a prayer. The prayer is that my fear be baseless! My fear is that these passages, which should so excite us and cause us to want to jump up now ... not wait but right now jump up and follow Jesus ... that these passages have not come alive enough for you. ... If so, my fault. I pray they have come alive.

AMEN

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