

Isaiah 40: 27-31
Mark 10: 17-31
October 28, 2012
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Two weeks ago I had the honor and pleasure of participating in a seminar at Roger Williams University. I was invited by Dr. Michael Hall, a member of our congregation to speak on the subject of the foundation of Judeo-Christian ethics. Sharing the podium with me was a wonderful retired professor from Tufts who spoke about what she termed “secular” ethics. She also described herself as a lifelong atheist.

Now here is the fascinating thing: When it came to the practical values which guide daily life we agreed completely. We both affirmed the integrity of individual life. We both affirmed the principle of mutual respect and working for the common good. We both opposed the oppression of people by political and economic power. *And* it may have surprised her that we both affirmed the fact that ultimately life is a mystery beyond human understanding.

What surprised me was the naïve assumptions that she and other atheists in the room exhibited about religion. There was an assumption that religion is all about spiritual anesthesia, aka: pie in the sky when you die. Religion is a thick warm comforter to protect us from the hard reality that there is no God and no meaning in life save what we create for ourselves. There was also expressed the idea that religion exists to crush the human will and compel us to do things like fly airplanes into skyscrapers. Since this was a discussion of ethics and not the existence of God, I did not point out that in recent history the most cruel and murderous government was one governed by atheism—the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin.

I begin this way because I realized that whatever its merits or flaws atheism represents an outsiders view of the life of faith. Lacking the experience of a spiritual power s, atheists—at least the atheists I encountered two weeks ago—assume that there is no such thing as spiritual experience. And since to them there can be no experience of God, because there is no God, therefore religion is an expression of what Sigmund Freud called “wish fulfillment”: a fantasy based on the yearning for an omnipotent creator God.

Having said this, however, I am aware that all of us possess an outsider point of view when it comes to scripture. I remember very well hearing the story of the rich young man and knowing that if the criterion for salvation required me to sell everything I would have to take my chances. And it was as an outsider that I understood Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God and eternal life to be about a club which included only the people who literally left everything for Jesus. Middle class people like me need not apply.

Now, I am not saying that any of you share this view. And I am not saying that I have completely made it to the *inside* of this question. But I do have a different perspective that makes spiritual sense to me.

The rich young man is an outsider. He does all the right things. Yet he clearly he is not at peace. He has this nagging sense that, despite all his faithfulness to the commandments of God in the law of Moses, he is missing out on the ultimate reward—eternal life. This is important. It is not the case that the man actually will miss out on the ultimate reward for a faithful life. He fears that he will. There is a big difference between what we fear about our lives and our actual circumstances. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus looks at the man with appreciation and love. He knows that as far as eternal life is concerned, this man has nothing to fear.

But there is a more critical concern. Jesus trusts that God has sent him into the world to awaken in humanity the faith that God intends all of God's children to have eternal life. But he also deeply believes that to worry about what happens after death misses the point. Life is not about suffering through our days burdened by fear, guilt and remorse. It is about experiencing the fullness of life right here and right now. That is why Jesus rarely speaks about heaven. He speaks about the Kingdom of God. By the way, notice how Jesus shifts the conversation from "eternal life" to the Kingdom.

For Jesus, the Kingdom of God is not a place. It is the spiritual reality of life. It is the dimension of life where all creation is in right relationship with the creator and with one another. In the Kingdom of God there is no anxiety about what will happen to me or those I love. In the Kingdom of God all people have all that they need. There is no striving, no competition, no need to keep some people down to maintain my position. Because God is taking care of all of my needs I do not need to hold onto more than I need. In the Kingdom of God everyone has the opportunity to live life as a gift. It is why Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done *on earth as it is in heaven.*" This is God's vision.

The critical theological point here is that the Kingdom of God is not a future promise. It has been already fulfilled in Jesus Christ. When Jesus read the scripture from Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...." He concluded, "Today *this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" Later when asked when the kingdom was coming, Jesus replied, "The kingdom is not *coming*...the kingdom is *in your midst.*" (Luke 17:21)

This is the *insider view*. It makes all the difference in the world in how we hear the scripture. For when Jesus tells the rich man to sell all that he has, give the proceeds to the poor and then come and follow him, Jesus is not asking for some heroically sacrificial deed to test the man's worthiness. He is inviting the man to enter fully into the experience of the kingdom of God *right here and right now*. Jesus is offering a prescription for a spiritual ailment; for he sees that the man does not believe he can live life without the security of possessions. Yet it is that very anxiety that keeps him from the peace of God.

Friends, isn't that true for you and me? Don't we wrestle with the awareness that what we have gives us a feeling of security in this life? Don't we experience the anxiety as a barrier to true peace and contentment in life? Yet how do we resolve the dilemma? How do we seek the peace of Christ in the midst of all the uncertainty about our jobs, our retirement, our ability to pay the rent or the mortgage, our medical and other bills? How do we seek the peace of God in the midst of worry about the future of our children and grandchildren?

But from the inside, this is not a call to be mindlessly heroic and sacrificial. Jesus invites you and me to stop worrying about the future and realize that right here and right now we are safe in God's hands. We are invited to cultivate a trust that God is able to provide for us far more than we can provide for ourselves. In Jesus' presence we are invited to feel that hard cold fear that acts as a wall to protect us from the chaos that we dread if we were to lose what we have. And when we feel that fear and indeed that terror, Jesus wants to come near to reassure us that we are safe. He wants us to recognize that the chaos and destruction we fear is an illusion. We cannot fall from the loving protection of God.

To the exiles in Babylon who were drained by worry about the future, God through Isaiah that apart from God we all grow weary. “But they that wait upon the Lord will renew there strength.”

So, this morning as we lift up the important spiritual power of giving our financial resources to support the ministry of Jesus in and through this congregation, please do not hear this message as a call to empty your bank accounts for Jesus’ sake. Instead I invite you to join me on a journey of exploring what keeps us from the peace that Jesus promises. What are we holding onto that gives a short term sense of security but which also maintains a level of anxiety. How are we seeking to maintain a bulwark against the flood that we fear will sweep away and those we love?

With Martin Luther, how do come to trust that God in Jesus Christ is that protection which can never fail and so find the peace of the kingdom which is in our midst and indeed is in fact within us. Amen