

God's Standard – Teresa Holden

Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81: 1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Today's Scripture readings all have to do with correction, or, at the least, guidance. Hebrews tends toward the guidance side with instructions about morality and ethics, about how to live one's life as a Christian. Jeremiah, the Psalm and Luke all point out errors in peoples' attitudes that have led them to not live up to a standard that is necessary for a believer. That is what I want us to think about today – that there are two standards. One is the standard that normal, everyday, reasonable people expect of themselves. The other standard – God's standard – is radical. It steps outside the norm for human behavior, and challenges people (us) to have faith and to take actions that surpass what the normal, everyday person expects of him or herself.

This sermon is informed by two transformational experiences I had this summer. I was blessed to be able to attend two institutes – one at the Duke University Divinity School that was hosted by their Center for Reconciliation. The other was a National Endowment for the Humanities Institute held at Harvard University's W. E. B. Du Bois Center for African and African American Research. All of that is a huge mouthful, and my experiences at each match the magnificence of the titles. I went to Duke for a week with a group commissioned by Greenville College, all of whom also attend St. Paul's. Besides me, Elizabeth Ahern, Kent Dunnington and Pedro Valentin attended.

We were there to think about Greenville College as a site where God's work of Reconciliation can take place. I spent the month of July at Harvard with 24 other scholars from across the country to study with the nation's leading experts on 20th Century African American history. While that wasn't connected directly with a spiritual aim, one of the things I love about my discipline of African American History is the fact that faith is central, and the church is always hovering. So, I approach today's Scriptures with everything that I learned at these institutes close and fresh in my mind. These experiences help me to understand the fact that God calls us to radical actions and to a standard that sets us apart from the culture in which we live.

In our Old Testament passage, we remember from last week that God called Jeremiah at a young age to deliver a particular message to the Hebrew people. In Chapter 2 his ministry begins, and throughout our reading for today, Jeremiah is describing God's deep disappointment that the people of Israel turned to other gods, specifically Ba'al. When they were in trouble, they didn't turn to God for help. They didn't remember or pay attention to the miraculous protection and care their people had received from God at other times. In verse 13, God's message is: "my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns [or wells] for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." Here, he is explaining that the Hebrews have turned from faith in the living and true God to faith in man-made gods. Why would they do this? What was the motivation behind the Hebrews' apostasy?

As I thought about this question, the verse that stuck out to me is verse 11. In the Revised Standard Version, this says: “Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.” When I first read this verse, I had my historian’s hat on, and I began to think about this contrast that Jeremiah makes between the Israelites and other groups of people who aren’t led by the eternal God. Jeremiah says the gods that they follow are made up; they’re imaginary. Yet, he claims, the people who follow these imaginary gods don’t forsake them. They sustain their faith in them, while the Hebrews shockingly have turned from their faith in the one eternal God.

Knowing something about these other civilizations can help us to understand why the Hebrews would reject the God of their fathers while people from other cultures didn’t. Simply, the standard presented by the gods of other civilizations was not as demanding as the God of the Hebrews. The gods of other civilizations were made in the image of man – they shared very human characteristics with the people who worshipped them. Ba’al was a primarily a fertility god who encouraged promiscuity in their places of worship, while God’s standard in the Ten Commandments prohibits adultery. Faithfulness and love, perfect love, are embedded in God’s law, but the gods of other civilizations have standards that are based on human desires. Thus, God’s standard for His people is high, much higher than what the other cultures perceived that their manmade gods required of them. Normal, everyday people in ancient times didn’t expect themselves to live by a standard as demanding as that of the Living God. How could the Hebrews possibly have attained this standard? Why should they have expected anything different of themselves than what was ordinary? The answer is embedded in Jeremiah’s words. What was God looking for out of the Israelites that they hadn’t done? All that was required of them was to ask the question – “Where is the Lord?” All they had to do was to seek God, to have a tiny bit of faith, something that God could work with, could expand on. The same is true of us – in order to live up to God’s standard, we need only ask, “Where are you Lord? Where are taking me today? What is that you ask of me?” A speck of faith, of reliance on God can lead to radical results.

In Luke, Jesus also revealed a higher standard, something normal, everyday people wouldn’t expect of themselves. Over the course of this passage, he grows increasingly radical. His explanation of why one should not initially sit in the seat of honor at a banquet makes sense to the reasonable mind – maybe someone even more important is coming. Being moved to a position of lower prestige would be horribly embarrassing, but being elevated to higher position would be satisfying. All of that makes sense to the rational mind. But Jesus moves from the reasonable to the radical in verses 12-14 when he tells his host that he shouldn’t invite his friends or brothers or relatives or rich neighbors to his banquets. Rather, Jesus instructs that the host should invite people who are impositions, who create problems, who might raise a ruckus to his banquets. The poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind – these are people whom everyone looks down upon in their culture. At their best, they will need help even entering the banquet. At their worst, they may stumble around, create a mess, have bad manners, eat too much. Or even worse, none of these people will reinforce the host’s position in society. They

can't reciprocate by inviting him to their own lavish banquet that will show off to the world what an important person that host is. Jesus presents a standard that doesn't make sense to the reasonable mind. Why in the world would someone have to do this? When we place ourselves in the position of the host, it causes us to take a step back – is this really what Jesus is requiring of us?

As you ponder that question, I want to share with you two examples I learned about this summer of people who stepped outside what is expected of normal, everyday people in their context. Their response to a higher standard gives us a glimpse of heaven, of the radically different world that God can build through the faithful work of His people.

The first example involves a man I met at the Duke Summer Institute whose name is Jim Abbott. Jim is a retired Episcopal priest from the Diocese of Western North Carolina. This Diocese has spent the last several years seeking active, tangible ways to ask forgiveness for their historic complicity with and participation in slavery and segregation. Jim took responsibility for writing a history of the Diocese that focuses entirely on this topic. This is a history written from a place of lament that exposes the sins of previous generations, and admits that the sin of bias and discrimination has continued over time. It reveals wounds that have never healed. In his history, Jim also tells about a "Service of Repentance, Healing and Reconciliation" that the diocese held in April, 2011 and which 600 Episcopalians of the Diocese attended. In that service, leaders publically and explicitly named the sins the Diocese had committed and asked forgiveness of their African American parishioners and the broader community. After this confession, the people who attended participated in a service of healing. Abbott describes this service in this way: "all the members of the congregation were invited to go to one of a dozen different, bi-racial healing stations for individual anointing and prayer – for the healing of their wounds, the lifting of their burdens, and the renewing of their strength. For many people, this was clearly the most powerful and moving part of the service." As you can see, this service called upon Episcopalians of Western North Carolina to do something very radical, something that doesn't make sense to the rational mind. A normal, everyday, reasonable person asks, why is it necessary to ask forgiveness for actions that people took over a hundred years ago, people to whom I may not even be related? But these actions parallel in spirit what Jesus calls us to in Luke 14. We are called to live by a different standard, one that seeks reconciliation as a highest priority, even when it is uncomfortable.

Another example comes from a film I viewed with my colleagues at the NEH Institute at Harvard. Some of you may have already seen this film as a part of the PBS "American Experience" series. It is called "Freedom Riders," and it originally aired in February, 2012. You can view it on-line now, and I would encourage you to do so. The film tells the story of a diverse group of people – young and old, black and white – who called themselves "Freedom Riders," and who sought in the summer of 1961 to integrate the nation's transit system. Starting in Atlanta, this integrated group of people who belonged to a civil rights group called the Congress of Racial Equality boarded Greyhound buses, with the intent of travelling to the deep South where racial violence had been raging. They wanted to demonstrate their unity against segregation, and

they were intent upon practicing the principles of nonviolent resistance should they meet with trouble.

Upon crossing the border into Alabama, trouble did indeed come their way. The Greyhound bus driver was stopped and warned by another Greyhound bus driver coming from the opposite direction that trouble awaited them in the town of Anniston. In the film, one sees footage of what took place in Anniston – the bus was met by a frenzied mob that prevented the bus from opening its doors at the bus station. Members of the Ku Klux Klan beat upon the windows and inflicted serious damage to the bus. Momentarily, disaster was averted as a police escort appeared and accompanied the bus to the edge of town, but at that point the bus was left on its own, and what lay in front of them was worse than what they had already encountered. The bus tires were slashed; windows were broken, and finally, a burning bundle of cloth was thrown into the bus. Miraculously, all of the passengers were able to struggle out of windows and get out of the bus before the interior was engulfed in flames.

Struggling for air, this well-dressed group of black and white, young and old riders was not escaping to a safe place outside the bus. Here they were subjected to the fists, violence and taunts of their assailants. The film vividly shows the physical suffering the Freedom Riders endured, as they tried to breathe and stay alive. They cried out for water, and amidst all of the viciousness, in the film footage, one can see a glass of water appearing seemingly out of nowhere and being given to each of the Freedom Riders. The person who was delivering the water was a 12-year-old white girl named Janie Miller, whose dad owned the local grocery store. As Janie filled and refilled a glass from a five-gallon bucket, members of her own community taunted and made fun of her, but Janie continued on. She adhered to a different standard than those around her. Neither the film, nor the book that the film is based upon talk about Janie's faith, but it seems clear that a spirit of love that can only come from God compelled her into action. In the coming days, Janie's family had to move away from Anniston because of threats made against them by the community, but in that moment Janie exemplified what we are all called to do. We are called to live by a radical standard of faith. One that believes that God will answer when we ask, "Where are you?" And one that propels us to actions of love and reconciliation in a culture that promotes selfishness and divisiveness.

Another precious memory that I have from this summer is a picture that I carry in my mind of the inscription that is above the exit of Duke's Divinity School. Engraved in the molding above the arched doorway is a Wesley quote. It says "And Best of All Is God Is With Us." As we seek God's voice and walk in the radical steps of Jesus, let us do so with that simple assurance that "best of all is God is with us."