

“Perspective and Choice” Luke 6:20-36 November 3, 2013

Children’s time: tarnished silver - still silver, and God’s love can make us shine

When our son, Andrew, was in high school he was a runner. All of the Cross Country meets were memorable, as we watched young men and women push themselves to their very limits, straining to beat time and opponents. My heart broke for some, as they were last, as they vomited at the end of the race, and as some sobbed over what seemed a performance not good enough. At most of the meets I attended there was a woman in a wheelchair near the finish line, and she made sure to clap for every single person who ran by. It seemed that when the crowd didn’t offer support for a particular runner, this woman made sure she did. She probably didn’t know most of the boys, but she called out in a loud voice, “Go, Taft,” “Go, Choate,” “Good going, Loomis...” When most of the runners had reached the end of the long race and the crowd started dispersing, this woman stayed right there and cheered for the very last runner, every time. I found myself deeply moved by her, and it seemed to me that God was actually telling me, “This woman is doing what I do – she’s pulling for every single one; nobody’s left out, and in fact, the ones who seem to be overlooked or less than able are the very ones I want to cheer on the most.” That woman - whose name I don’t know - became an instrument of God’s love for me as she symbolized how much God loves me and every one of us. Perspective.

All Saints.... In the truest sense of the word, a saint is anybody who makes visible for others the love and mercy of God. A saint is an instrument. Like a pencil in the hand of God, as God writes someone who is struggling in life a letter of hope and love through one who is willing to be so used..

An old story tells of two men cutting stone. The work was hard and the sun was hot. A passerby asked one man what he was doing. "Look and see for yourself; I am cutting a stone," was the rather curt reply. Not far away the passerby asked the other man the same question, and this man said, with a gleam in his eye, "Sir, I am building a Cathedral!" One saw his work as merely a job all itself, a thing to get done and have done with it. The other man saw the same work as it was related to a vast design, as having a place in a pattern, the working out of which would make a house of God. Perspective.

The words of Jesus that we heard today offer us a radically different perspective. The people of Jesus’ day believed that if things were going well for a person, then that person was surely pleasing God. So Jesus shook them up big-time, telling them that people who didn’t have enough to eat and who couldn’t pay their rent were the ones who were blessed! And once he had gotten their attention, he gave his followers an assignment that we struggle with to this day: **LOVE YOUR ENEMIES! BLESS THOSE WHO CURSE YOU!...BE MERCIFUL, JUST AS GOD IS MERCIFUL.**

That’s when a lot of us may feel as though we need to drop out of this Christianity thing, because Jesus set the bar really high with this. But here’s another perspective: In this scripture Jesus INVITES us to ask God for help, because we *cannot* love our enemies on our own. God knows our struggles and the power of our fears and resentments. God understands these things, but in the face of them, God invites us to let him work in our hearts and our lives, to polish off

the tarnish and let the beauty God put in our hearts find a way to shine through.

I have talked with lots of people who have felt that somehow their own make-up renders God unable to use them, or unwilling to be bothered with them. They may attend worship and support their church or synagogue, but deep inside they feel too far from what they think they ought to be, or too empty... Too something...

But the scriptures tell us that it precisely when we feel it unlikely or impossible for God to work with us that God *most* likely is nudging and nurturing us to action!

Just think about the folks God used as God's instruments in the Bible! What personnel agency would have acted favorably on Moses' resume: 80 years old, a murder under his belt, and a problem with stuttering and confidence? Not a likely candidate for the rigors of standing up to a Pharaoh and then dealing with a bickering group of undisciplined folks in a wilderness for forty years!

Whoever would have picked a Canaanite prostitute, Rahab, to be the one to speak words of faith that God would deliver the land of Canaan into the hands of the Hebrew people to Joshua's spies, thus inspiring them, unlike the first set of spies forty years earlier, to have an encouraging report? "The Lord is delivering the land into our hands."

And who would ever have chosen Jonah to take a message of warning to the residents of Nineveh, when Jonah didn't even like the people and in fact wanted nothing at all to do with the mission? When Jonah was terribly upset when the people were not destroyed by God?

It's for real people, for us! God is not afraid to have the record show the blotches and blemishes of the picture! For Christians, the image of God working through the "wrong" people is even intensified as those who were chosen to be Jesus' disciples showed a complete lack of understanding as to his intentions, and a total ability to let him down by betrayal, denial, and self-interest.

Perspective. God can work even through people like us! God understands all the things that pull us away from God, all the things that make us wonder whether God really is with us and whether God would ever want to work with us. God knows where we're selfish, where we find it impossible to forgive somebody who has hurt us, God understands who we are when we're not putting up a front for other people. Right where we feel the most cruddy or too far away from God is probably just where God will meet us, if we but ask for help. God knows the beauty underneath the tarnish of each one of us, and God can help us let real light shine through.

So hear this if you hear nothing else: Right in the midst of whatever life is for us, God is nudging us, asking us to dare to trust that Jesus' way of love and forgiveness is the best way to find real life. God can use every one of us to communicate God's love, sort of like that woman who cheered for the ones others overlooked, the ones who came in last; sort of like our beloved Marilyn, who encouraged and put up with us all...

Each of us has a choice. We can go through life marking time, day after day, month after month, celebration/holiday/vacation time after celebration/holiday/vacation time, or just focusing on surviving life; OR we can be part of something larger: God's working to share grace, forgiveness, mercy and hope in this world. This is not for untouchable saints somewhere, but for real people right now! May God's history be our story as we open our hearts to God's leading and realize that the ground on which we stand, wherever we are, whoever we are, whatever we're doing, is holy ground. May we all be saints as we dare to let God work through us, helping each other and others to know God's love! Amen.