

October 12, 2014 “Headaches and Halfheartedness” Exodus 32:1-14 Luke 14:16-24

Headaches. Lots of things can give us headaches, including allergies, the flu, eye problems, a bump on the head; or worse things, like a tumor or other serious condition. But sometimes headaches are caused by the people in our lives and the tension they produce in us.

Your friend gets mad at you, for reasons you may or may not understand. Headache. Your child gets suspended from school. Headache. After you paid all the bills this week, you discovered that you have forgotten to stub some other checks, so you will have five checks bouncing. Headache. You get a letter from the IRS indicating that there are some questions concerning your tax return for a certain year. Headache. Part of your family won't speak to another part of your family. Headache. The boss warns you that you are on the list of those who may be laid off. Headache.

I almost called today's sermon “God's Headaches,” but did not because God probably doesn't get headaches the way we do. After all, Jesus told us that God is Spirit (John 4:24). But the Bible definitely wants us to understand that the people God tried to work with all through biblical history acted in such ways as to provoke in ANYbody HUGE headaches! Today's scriptures suggest two of these “headache” episodes.

In Exodus, God had heard the cry of the Israelites as they suffered in slavery in Egypt, so God called Moses and strengthened him to confront Pharaoh, and God finally, through all those plagues and then through the parting of the great sea, delivered the people out of Egypt. As we've seen in recent weeks, the people found things about which to complain just about every step of the way, yelling at Moses (and God), “You brought us out of Egypt to have us die out here. We wish we were back there!” Now, in today's reading, Moses went up on the mountain to pray, and he was gone for a very long time. The people began to fear that he was gone forever, so they got scared. They badgered Aaron (Moses' brother) into making them a “god” they could see, a calf of gold, an idol along the lines of the idols of the Egyptians, and then they danced around it and got drunk and had orgies..

Well, you know the story: God was furious, ready to get rid of those people once and for all. God had had enough, and so declared to Moses that God would kill them all and start over, this time using Moses as the first father.... But Moses talked God out of this, so God changed his mind and continued working with those people.... But it was a big headache, for sure.

All the years between wilderness golden calf experience and the dinner Jesus shared with the Pharisees provided more headaches for God. Throughout the centuries, very few of God's people, kings included, seemed able or willing to trust God for very long...

Finally, God acted to show the faithless world His love by embracing it through the life of Jesus, to give us a “life-sized visual” of the extent of God's love for us. But when Jesus began his ministry, he was immediately met with resistance by the religious authorities of his day.

Those who should have recognized the great gift God was offering them instead saw threats to their own well-being or power, and so they rejected Jesus, having him killed on the Cross.

Jesus understood what was going on with the Pharisees and Sadducees. One Sabbath, when he was dining at the home of a Pharisee, he told three parables about “kingdom banquet etiquette.” 14:8 - Don’t take a prestigious seat when you go to a banquet; instead, take a modest one and hope that you will be asked to move to a better seat. 14:12 - When you give a dinner, invite folks who cannot pay you back. And today’s lesson, the parable of the rude invitees to the wedding banquet. The ones who had been so carefully invited and for whom the dinner had been prepared ended up offering all kinds of excuses for not attending. So the banquet-giver had his servants go out into the streets and invite the poor and the blind and the lame and the maimed, those who were normally never invited anywhere. Jesus’ message: God is bringing about something different from the ways of the world – watch out!

In the banquet parable, God’s people did not respond to God as God hoped they would. They found one excuse after another, good excuses as to why they could not participate in the celebration the banquet-giver had prepared. The excuses are ones that the Bible declared acceptable reasons for a man to be excused from military service for a period of time, so that he would not have his mind on something else while serving in the army. *In this case, the Law was used to avoid receiving the celebration God was offering.*

What about us? How often do WE give God a “headache” by not responding to God, or by not using what we have been given to love other people, by coming up with all sorts of excuses as to why we don’t really commit ourselves to God? Do we not realize that every time we ignore Jesus Christ in our life, we say NO? Do we not see that we give God a “headache” whenever we love money more than God, when our recreation time means more to us than caring about/loving our neighbors, when we get more excited over a new phone than we do over the promise we have been given that we have a Shepherd for every minute of our life and beyond?

These kinds of “headaches” are really “heartaches.” Some parents can touch this too well, when their kids don’t really show much care or appreciation. Too many are very good at taking but not so good at giving or helping. We do the same to God.

Here’s a change of pace, a fun illustration about a “half-way” commitment when it comes to God. It’s entitled, “The Roadkill Grill,” and it’s found in a book of stories for youth. Listen to the “Roadkill Grill Café” menu: Appetizers include: Fried Deer Hide; Riggormortis Tortoise; Awesome Possom Blossom; Critter Fritters; and Bug Juice Soup. Rabbit of the Day is “Thumper on the Bumper.” “Fender Lickin’ Good Entrees” include: Chunk of Skunk, Rack of Raccoon, Smear of Deer, Cheap Sheep, Flat Cat, Wreckof Lamb, Squeal Parmigiana, Robin on the Hood, Alley Cat-serole, Braked Chicken, and Squiche Lorraine. Canine Cuisine includes: Slab of Lab, Cocker Cutlets, Ground Round Hound, and Hushed Puppies. Desserts include Road Toad Alamode and Armadillo Crunch.

Wayne Rice listed all these “delicacies” in order to get the full attention of the hearers. Then he went on to suggest that many Christians are also in danger of becoming “roadkill,” as “middle-of-the-road Christians.” In Rice’s words: “They live for Christ when it’s convenient, then live for themselves or for the crowd when that’s more convenient. They may be Christians on Sunday, but the rest of the week you can’t really tell which side of the road they are on. They are middle-of-the-road Christians.” (*More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*, Wayne Rice, p. 147)

When we are half-hearted as Christians, when we are only partly committed to God in our lives, we are probably God’s biggest headache and heartache.

The Bible says, “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). Jesus said: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24). And in the Book of Revelation, “So, because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:16).

Our world offers tremendous challenges -- and headaches -- to us all, especially right now. We are concerned about ISIS and Ebola and heightened racism and our economy.... Friends and relatives - and some of you who are here - battle cancer or other serious conditions. Every time our lives shake us up, we seem to “re-discover” God, fervently praying for safety, for hope. But the rest of the time, it is all too easy to be complacent, more interested in just about anything but God.

Today, and every day, we must choose what we will let be important in our lives. God wants us to know that our decisions are life-and-death decisions. The banquet has been prepared. The invitations sit on the bedsides and dining room tables of our hearts, awaiting response.

Half-way is not an acceptance. “Some day” is not acceptance. Acceptance is saying YES and then following through, making the “yes” a priority. It means acknowledging that what God offers us and asks of us is the most important thing we can be part of in all of our life.

So much in life keeps us blind to what is really important, to what we really need. In this country, we have been steeped in comforts and insulations. Right now, though, we face serious threats, threats of illness and terrorism. If ever we and our children need a God bigger than this world, it is today. Such is our God. God is bigger than cancer, bigger than nuclear disaster, bigger than Ebola or Enterovirus, bigger than the challenges of any nation. Only God is big enough to see us through any headache or heartache, anything life or death can throw at us.

May each of us be led to truly accept God’s invitation for life. May we walk in the way of Jesus Christ and let him help and guide us, that we may learn to see and to share what is really important in life. Amen.