

**Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost A
Incarnation Lutheran Church**

YOUR IMAGE OF GOD

WE'RE STILL IN THAT "DIFFICULT TIME TO PREACH" SEASON OF THE CHURCH YEAR" THAT I MENTIONED LAST WEEK. WHILE THE WORLD OUT THERE IS GETTING ALL READY FOR CHRISTMAS AND SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDST OF PARTIES, AND SHOPPING, AND PRESENTS AND SANTA, PERHAPS FINDING A LITTLE TIME TO MENTION THE BABY JESUS- WHILE ALL THAT IS GOING ON OUT THERE, WE, IN HERE, ARE DWELLING ON SCRIPTURE TEXTS THAT POINT US TO HIS SECOND COMING AND WHAT THAT END OF THE AGES WILL BE LIKE. AND OFTEN, AS I SAID LAST WEEK, THESE SCRIPTURE TEXTS, AT LEAST ON THE SURFACE, SEEM TO BE IN DIRECT CONTRAST TO OUR LUTHERAN THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS – GOD'S GIFT OF GRACE TO UNDESERVING BUT BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD. SO, A HARD TO PREACH TIME!

TODAY'S GOSPEL, THOUGH, SHIFTS A LITTLE FROM THAT CONTRADICTORY MESSAGE – OR PERHAPS NOT – WE SHALL SEE IN A LITTLE WHILE – BUT IT SURELY ADDS ANOTHER LAYER OF DIFFICULTY IN THAT IT IS SO FAMILIAR – AND FAMILIAR TEXTS ARE OFTEN HARDER TO PREACH THAN THE LESS FAMILIAR ONES. MANY OF YOU

YOU HAVE HEARD THIS ONE MANY TIMES OVER THE YEARS, IM SURE, ESPECIALLY DURING THAT ANNUAL FALL STEWARDSHIP CAMPAIGN. GOD GIVES SPIRITUAL GIFTS TO EACH OF US ACCORDING TO OUR ABILITIES – AND WE ARE TO USE THOSE GIFTS TO GROW THE KINGDOM OF GOD – AND WHEN WE DO – MORE WILL BE GIVEN – AND WHEN WE DON'T – ALL WILL BE TAKEN AWAY.

WELL, THAT MAY MAKE FOR A GUILT-PRODUCING, FEAR-FILLED STEWARDSHIP SERMON, BUT WHEN TAKEN ALLEGORICALLY LIKE THAT, IT PORTRAYS AN IMAGE OF GOD THAT IS IN EXACT OPPOSITION TO EVERYTHING JESUS TEACHES US AND SHOWS US ABOUT WHO GOD IS. LOOK WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE EQUATE GOD WITH THE MASTER. FIRST OF ALL, GOD BECOMES SELECTIVE IN GOD'S GIVING. TO SOME GOD GIVES MUCH; TO OTHERS, ONLY A LITTLE. GOD BECOMES AN ABSENT GOD – AWAY ON A JOURNEY – LEAVING US ALONE AND ON OUR OWN UNTIL GOD DECIDES TO RETURN. AND GOD BECOMES EITHER A REWARDING GOD OR A PUNISHING GOD DEPENDING ON OUR ACTIONS. TO THOSE WHO HAVE DONE MUCH, GOD GIVES MORE. TO THOSE WHO HAVE DONE LITTLE, GOD TAKES AWAY. AND THAT IMAGE OF GOD COULD NOT BE FURTHER AWAY FROM THE GOD OF THE SCRIPTURES,

ESPECIALLY THE GOD BEST REVEALED TO US IN THE LIFE, DEATH AND REDURRECTION OF GOD'S SON, THE CHRIST.

LISTEN TO SOME OF THE WORDS OF JESUS ABOUT WHO GOD IS AND HOW GOD ACTS ON BEHALF OF HUMANKIND. IN THE BEAUTITUDES, "BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN." OR THESE OTHER PASSAGES –ALL FROM THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW: "'IT IS NOT THE WILL OF YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN THAT ONE OF THESE LITTLE ONES SHOULD BE LOST." OR, "THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST WILL BE LAST." OR HOW ABOUT THIS ONE? "ALL WHO EXALT THEMSELVES WILL BE HUMBLLED, AND ALL WHO HUMBLE THEMSELVES WILL BE EXALTED."

THOSE ARE JUST SOME OF THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS ABOUT WHO GOD IS – BUT A CLOSER LOOK AT HOW JESUS LIVED AND DIED AND WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD SHOWS US EVEN MORE WHO GOD IS. JESUS FED THE HUNGRY AND HEALED THE SICK. HE ATE WITH SINNERS AND HE STOOD UP AGAINST THE HYPOCROCY OF LEGALISTIC RELIGION. HE LOVED THE UNLOVABLE; TOUCHED THE UNTOUCHABLE. HE STAYED THE COURSE. HE GAVE HIS LIFE THAT WE MIGHT HAVE LIFE. HE WAS RESURRECTED FROM THE DEAD – THERBY ASSURING US THAT DEATH DOES NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD. AND, HE WILL COME

AGAIN TO BRING US, CLOTHED IN HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ALONE, TO THE BANQUET FEAST OF GOD THAT WILL NEVER END.

SO, IT SEEMS OBVIOUS, DOES IT NOT, THAT THIS PARABLE OF JESUS CANNOT IN ANY WAY BE TEACHING US BOUT WHO GOD IS. IT JUST CAN'T. SO, THEN, WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

AGAIN THIS WEEK, AS OFTEN FOR ME, IT'S DAVID LOSE'S INSIGHTS THAT CAUGHT MY ATTENTION - IN FACT, GAVE ME A NEW INSIGHT INTO THIS PARABLE. SUPPOSE, DR. LOSE SAYS, THIS PARABLE IS TEACHING HOW IT IS THAT OUR IMAGE OF WHO GOD IS SHAPES HOW WE BEHAVE - HOW WE LIVE? SUPPOSE THAT'S WHAT JESUS WAS POINTING OUT TO HIS AUDIENCE THAT DAY - THE CONTRAST BETWEEN HOW THE LEGALISTIC RELIGIOUS AND THE TRUSTING BELIEVER SEES GOD AND THEN LIVES IN RESPONSE TO THAT IMAGE? JUST SUPPOSE!

IN THIS PARABLE, THE MASTER GIVES 1, 2 AND 5 TALENTS TO HIS SERVANTS. A TALENT WAS MONEY AND ONE TALENT WAS WORTH ABOUT 15 YEARS WAGES. SO, EVEN THE ONE TALENT RECIPIENT RECEIVED AN ABUNDANCE; THE OTHER TWO - MORE THAN THEY CAN EARN IN A LIFETIME. THE FIRST TWO OBVIOUSLY HAVE A GOOD

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MASTER. THEY JOYFULLY RECEIVE THE MONEY, FEARLESSLY INVEST IT, AND ARE EXCITED TO SHARE WITH THE MASTER THE GOOD NEWS OF THE RESULTS OF THEIR INVESTMENT. BUT THIS 3RD ONE – THIS ONE TALENT GUY - LOOK AT HIS IMAGE OF THE MASTER. HE SEES HIS MASTER AS A HARSH MAN WITH A DUBIOUS WORK ETHIC – LETTING OTHERS DO THE WORK AND TAKING THE CREDIT, TAKING FROM THOSE WHO HAVE LITTLE, REWARDING THE ALREADY RICH, COLD-HEARTED, A MAN TO BE FEARED. AND BECAUSE OF THAT IMAGE, HIS UNDERSTANDING OF WHO HIS MASTER IS, THAT SERVANT COULD DO NOTHING BUT MAKE SURE HE DIDN'T LOSE WHAT HE WAS GIVEN BECAUSE HE KNEW IF HE DID HE WOULD BE PUNISHED SEVERELY. SEE WHAT A DIFFERENCE HIS IMAGE OF HIS MASTER MADE IN HOW HE BEHAVED, HOW HE LIVED – IN CONTRAST TO THE FIRST TWO?

SO, OF COURSE, THAT BRINGS US TO THE PRESENT – TO US - TO HOW IT IS THAT WE IMAGE OUR GOD TO BE. AND MAYBE I REALLY NEED TO PERSONALIZE THIS. HOW DO YOU INDIVIDUALLY – NOT WE COLLECTIVELY – BUT YOU INDIVIDUALLY – HOW DO YOU IMAGE GOD TO BE? AND HOW DOES YOUR IMAGE SHAPE YOUR BEHAVIOR? YOUR LIFE?

DO YOU IMAGE GOD TO BE:

+ SELECTIVE IN BLESSING OR INCLUSIVE IN LOVE?

+ GRACIOUS OR STERN?

+ LOVING OR JUDGMENTAL?

+ UNDERSTANDING AND FORGIVING OR PRONE TO VIOLENCE?

+ CARING FOR THE LEAST OF THESE OR SERVING THE FEW?

+ REWARDING THE FEW AND CONDEMNING THE MANY?

+ WILLING TO GIVE LIFE TO ALL OR ONLY THOSE WORTHY?

**+DO YOU SEE YOURSELF AS ONE OF GOD'S FAVORED OR ONE WHOM
GOD IGNORES?**

**AND NOW PONDER, IF YOU WILL, HOW YOUR LIFE REFLECTS YOUR
IMAGE OF GOD.**

**YOU KNOW THAT OLD SUNDAY SCHOOL STORY, I'M SURE. A
LITTLE GIRL IS HARD AT WORK, DRAWING A PICTURE. HER TEACHER
SAYS TO HER, "SUSIE, WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON SO HARD?" SUSIE
REPLIES, "I'M DRAWING A PICTURE OF GOD." "YOU CANT DO THAT,"
THE TEACHER RESPONDS. "NO ONE KNOWS WHAT GOD LOOKS LIKE."
"THEY WILL WHEN I GET DONE," SAYS SUSIE.**

**YOU KNOW, THERE'S TRUTH IN THAT. EVERYTHING WE DO,
EVERYTHING WE SAY, HOW WE BEHAVE, HOW WE ACT AND REACT,**

**HOW WE WORSHIP, HOW WE LIVE BOTH OUT THERE AND IN HERE
REFLECTS OUR IMAGE OF HOW IT IS THAT WE KNOW GOD TO BE.
THAT THEN, INDEED, DETERMINES HOW WE LIVE "IN THE MEANTIME"
UNTIL CHRIST COMES AGAIN.**

**PERHAPS THAT IS WHAT JESUS WAS TEACHING THAT DAY. IT'S
ONLY WHEN WE KNOW THE GOD OF SCRIPTURES, THE GOD OF GRACE
AND MERCY AND LOVE BEST REVEALED TO US THROUGH GOD'S SON,
THE CHRIST - AND WHEN WE LIVE IN A TRUSTING AND JOYFUL
RELATIONSHIP WITH THAT GOD - THAT WE FIND THE FREEDOM TO
LIVE ALL THE DAYS OF OUR LIVES LOVING KINDNESS, DOING JUSTICE,
AND WALKING HUMBLY WITH OUR GOD.**

**IN HONOR AND IN MEMORY OF MY FRIEND AND MENTOR TIM,
WHO ALWAYS ENDED HIS SERMONS THIS WAY - I INVITE YOU TO
THINK ABOUT IT - AND AS WAS ADDED AT TIM'S FUNERAL THIS PAST
WEDNESDAY, WHEN TIME SAID "THINK ABOUT IT" HE DIDN'T JUST
MEAN THINK ABOUT IT - HE MEANT DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. SO,
THINK ABOUT IT. AMEN.**