

September 7, 1980
Luke 13:1-9 (NE)
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GOD AND HIS WILL

"...for God is love."

--I John 4:8

Today initiates a series of sermons which I have wanted to preach for a long time but have not done so, frankly, because I lacked something of the necessary courage to do so.

Each of the sermons for the next few Sundays will be divided into two parts. It is the first part that you will find somewhat new and different. I hope you will also find it challenging, for in that part of the sermon I am going to be emphasizing what I do not believe about each particular theological subject under consideration. Then, having done that, I will proceed to tell you something of what I do believe about the subject.

I have wanted to do this for quite some time, not because I desire to stand in this pulpit and be negative, nor yet because I wish to shock anyone with my disbelief, but because I have wanted the message always to be as positive as possible and because I did not wish to put doubt into anyone's mind and thus weaken someone's faith rather than strengthen it. But I have, with the passage of the years, finally convinced myself that it is occasionally necessary to be negative before one can be positive. Sometimes it is necessary to remove false or weak concepts before they can be replaced by better and stronger ones. At this point in my ministry I am concerned to help my listeners build a solid, reasonable and helpful Christian faith, and in order to do that one must occasionally emphasize what one does not believe and thus remove some possible impediments to that stronger, better faith. At least I hope that is how all of this is going to work out.

Some Christians possess merely an inherited faith. What they believe has pretty much been handed down to them from parents and others who have never really thought very deeply about what it is that they do believe. Perhaps they cling to theological concepts that date back hundreds or even thousands of years and which can no longer be rationally defended or supported by the vast store of truth we have discovered since.

In any event, we begin this morning by talking about God and God's will and I want to spend our first few minutes together telling you what I do not believe about that particular theological concept.

Let me first, however, dispel what might perhaps be one of your concerns. I believe strongly in the reality of God. I am no atheist nor agnostic.

One atheist complained to a friend because, as he put it, "Christians have their special holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, and Jews celebrate their national holidays, such as the Passover and Yom Kippur. We atheists," he said, "have no recognized national holiday. It's unfair discrimination." To that, his friend replied, "Why don't you celebrate April 1st?"

I share the conviction of the Psalmist, a conviction he held so strongly he insisted on saying it twice: "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'".

I believe strongly in the reality of God, and that God is love. But there are extant some ideas about God and about God's nature that have almost become Christian orthodoxy, and in which I do not believe.

II

In general, I do not believe that God is a big Santa Claus, or a kind of father-figure, or a severe and terrible judge, sitting in the sky somewhere, keeping watch over each individual's every action and recording it all in some kind of heavenly ledger. Everything you and I do, good or evil, leaves its indelible mark on us. No record has to be kept anywhere else. God can take one look at our spirits and read what we are. Each of us is his own ledger.

Nor do I believe that God can be wheedled, and cajoled, and begged until finally he will give us all that we pray for. I recognize that the New Testament admonishes us to pray without ceasing, but I take that to mean that we ought, without ceasing, seek fellowship with God through prayer. I do not believe God is the kind of God who will give us what we want if we just ask for it often enough, and I hope he is not that kind of God. I want him to give me what he, in his superior wisdom, knows is good for me and for my loved ones, not what I, in my ignorance, often am tempted to ask him for.

One of the worst of all misshapen Christian beliefs is to the effect that God is responsible for everything that happens. A plague visits the land--it is the will of God. A tidal wave wipes out a thousand lives--it is the will of God. A beautiful little child dies of an unconquered disease--it is the will of God. My business fails, my love for another is unrequited, I do not pass my college exams, my house catches fire--accept it all for it is the will of God. That, I certainly do not believe. Such belief, it seems to me, comes close to blasphemy. God created a world of cause and effect, a rational, logical world, could we but understand it perfectly, not a world of blind chance and accident, not a capricious and chaotic world.

Finally, the most controversial point of all; I do not believe that Jesus was God. He was the most God-like person I know anything about. His truth and inspiration surely came from God. He knew God as probably no other has ever known him, but he himself was not God. Of this we shall speak more fully next Sunday.

The God in whom I believe does not have to become a man himself in order to understand man; he is omniscient. He made man! He knows man better than man knows himself. The God in whom I believe does not have to become a man in order to overcome evil; he is omnipotent. The God in whom I believe does not have to become a man in order to have fellowship with man; he is omnipresent, always "closer to us than breathing and nearer than hands and feet." God is with us. The question is, are we with him? Jesus was not God. Only God is God.

III

These then are some of my strong feelings concerning the reality of God. I do not bring them to you as dogma or creed. It is all part of my personal faith and the consequence of my own spiritual pilgrimage. I share these things with you only for your consideration.

Most of us I do believe have far too small a concept of God. Perhaps it is because we have magnified our humanity to the point of being unable to conceive of any being wiser, better, more powerful than ourselves. But

Whatever your mind comes at,
I tell you flat,
God is not that.

He is infinitely more than that!

In spite of all we may know about God, in spite of all that Jesus taught us and showed us about God, God is the greatest of mysteries. A modern legend told by T. H. White has Merlin, the magician of King Arthur fame, reveal something of this great mystery which is God:

A certain Rabbi went on a journey with the prophet Elijah. They walked all day, and when night had come they arrived at the humble cottage of a man whose only treasure was a cow. The man and his wife ran out to welcome the strangers and open-handedly offered them all the simple hospitality they were capable of giving. Elijah and the Rabbi were entertained with plenty of cow's milk and sustained with home-made bread and butter. They were put to sleep in the best bed, which wasn't very good, while their kindly hosts lay down before the kitchen fire. But in the morning the poor man's cow was dead. The Rabbi was very upset and thought that Elijah should have saved the cow.

The next day they walked many miles further. When evening came they had arrived at the house of a merchant whose hospitality they requested. The merchant, however, was cold and proud and all that he would do for the prophet and his companion was to lodge them in a cowshed and feed them on bread and water. In the morning Elijah thanked him very much for what he had done, and as a return for his kindness, sent for a mason to repair one of his walls which happened to be falling down.

When they were again on their way the Rabbi was unable to keep silent any longer and begged the holy man to explain the meaning of his dealings with these human beings. Replied the prophet, "In regard to the man who received us so hospitably, it was decreed that his wife was to die that night, but in reward for his kindness and goodness to us, God took the cow instead of the wife. I repaired the wall of the unaccommodating merchant because a chest of gold was concealed near the place and if the merchant had repaired the wall himself he would have discovered the treasure. Say not, therefore, to the Lord, 'What doest thou.' But rather say in thy heart, 'Must not the Lord of all the earth do right.'"

That legend incorporates a truth which I most surely believe. Whatever God does is right and good. It is right and good because God does it. But surely that does not mean that everything that happens happens because God ordains it. The rub is that you and I cannot always know whether some strange, or tragic, or blessed event is the result of what God has done, or the consequence of what man has done. "'My ways are not your ways,' saith the Lord of Hosts.'"

I have a strong conviction that God has given man free will. He can change things, he can alter circumstances, he is not the helpless victim of a strange concatenation of events. He is, to a very large degree, the master of his own destiny, as well as the victim of his own ignorance and folly.

~ Jesus did not incarnate God, he incarnated the will of God for man. He showed us what God wants of man and what man can yet become, and must become, if there is ever to be any peace and brotherhood on earth.

For too many people today, including too many Christians, God is irrelevant to the kind of society in which they live. Many may tend to believe in a God who satisfied men and women of some 5000 years ago but now believe that God to be inadequate to our modern scientific age. We tend to treat Him with a bit of reverence and respect for after all, look what he did for our forefathers, but we doubt that he can deal adequately with the complexities and problems of the twentieth century.

If you believe that, you believe in a God who is far too small. Others may believe in a God who is the product of centuries of human superstition and ignorance. The biggest task any one of us has for the rest of our lives is to search for the God that is. He is indeed the God of Jesus Christ, but he will continue to be irrelevant until he becomes our God, and we become his children.