

Randy Lovejoy's Sermon
10th April, 2011

Scripture Reading

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

Romans 2:1-4

Introduction

Alzheimer's is a terrible disease. Losing the ability to acquire new memories means losing something that is essential for human community.

As Alzheimer's progresses, the patient becomes confused and irritable. They no longer recognize people that they have known for years. People visit them as a continuation of the relationship. But the Alzheimer's patient can't access the stories which define the relationship. As a result, they simply cannot make sense of their interactions with these people. This frustrates them as they attempt to understand.

This dynamic of stories and interpretation is important, not just to our self-understanding as individuals, but for our self-understanding as the human race. We can only make sense of our lives on this planet when we know and remember key stories. Without these stories and without this ability to interpret we become confused and irritable.

The Western civilization has spent the last 150 years pursuing a mechanistic and scientific view of the world. While this has been very helpful in raising quality of life on this planet, we have forgotten key stories that have helped the human race make sense of life for

millenia.

It is as though we are in that library that the beast shows Belle in the Disney version of “Beauty and the Beast”. The books we focus on are on the lower shelves. We tell ourselves stories of cause and effect. Stories of how we came to be. Stories of what we can do to make ourselves healthier and happier. Everyone of us has a plan to shape ourselves into our own image.

But we have neglected other stories in the books on the higher shelves. Their pages are worn from being frequently read in the past. Now, however, they sit on their shelves gathering dust. These stories focus on questions like why we exist and where we go after we die. These stories are help us understand what we are supposed to do with our time on this planet.

Today we are going to remember these stories. Today we are going to be like Belle in the first library in “Beauty and the Beast” At the beginning of the show she goes into the store, past the books easily within her grasp. She climbs up the ladder to the highest bookshelf. She takes out the book, blows off the dust, and brings it down to read. Today we are going to “do a Belle” and remember some of the stories our culture has started to forget; key stories that help us to make sense of our lives.

Move

Life on this planet is not what it should be. This isn’t a story we need to be told. This is something we all feel deep down in our bones. Examples of this abound. Let me pick just one.

Laurent Gbagbo has a PhD in history and was known during his studies for a love of the Latin language. He has a broad smile and an easy laugh. He has a passion for music and good food.

In 2000, Laurent Gbagbo the people of Ivory Coast brought him to power. It was a long road for Gbagbo. In 1971 he was jailed for "subversive teaching" by long time ruler Felix Houphouet-Boigny. Houphouet-Boigny. Twenty-nine years later he ran against a military leader named Robert Guei. Guei tried to rig the elections in his own favor and almost succeeded. But the people of Abidjan hit the streets in protest. Guei's plans failed and Gbagbo began his rule.

Fast forward to 2011. The Ivory Coast held successful democratic elections. Gbagbo ran against Mr. Outarra. Mr. Outarra won. The United Nations certified his victory. Mr. Gbagbo would not stand down.

A war ensued in which 473 people have died and 1 million people have been displaced.

At this point Mr. Gbagbo is holed up in the presidential palace with his wife and two daughters. Mr. Outarra is in a Golf Hotel protected by the U.N.

Life on this planet is not what it should be.

Move

We know that life on this planet is not what it should be. But this isn't enough. Deep inside of us we want things to be different. We want action.

We want justice to be done in Ivory Coast. We want Mr. Outarra to rule. We want Gbagbo and his family to be sent out of the country. We want the killing to stop. We want Ivorians to return to their homes and rebuild their countries and their lives.

Once these things are done, we want Gbagbo and his key military leaders to face charges at the International Criminal Court and get some very serious jail time.

It isn't enough to make declarations about the world not being what it should be. We want action!

Move

But have you ever noticed that our attempts at justice never seem to get things to "the way they should be"? Have you noticed that we take action against the things that are wrong and yet we never seems to get from things not being as they should be to things being right and just and fair?

Even if our desires in the Ivory Coast are fulfilled things will not be "as they should". It seems clear in this situation that Mr. Gbagbo is the bad guy. But when we dig a little deeper things get more confusing. Remember Felix Houghouet-Boigny, the ruler who imprisoned Mr. Gbagbo and had amassed a fortune of between 7

and 11 billion dollars at his death? Mr. Outarra was his prime minister.

Also, before all of this, Mr. Gbagbo accused Mr. Outarra of leading a rebel army. Mr. Outarra denied this. But when this most recent war began most of the Ivorian troops stood with Mr. Gbagbo. Guess who was fighting for Mr. Outarra? Rebel soldiers and ethnic militias.

Finally, though the U.N. said the vote was free and fair, the constitutional council of Ivory Coast had actually sided with Gbagbo and ruled the vote out of order. Mr. Gbagbo says the French want to reassert colonial power over the country as one of the largest cocoa producers in the world.

Who is "most right"? Who is "most wrong"? When will justice be complete? Only God knows.

Our justice, once implemented, never seems untainted. It never seems to get us to a world where things are as they should be.

Move

And so we get frustrated. Our inability to correct things on this planet as human beings makes us complain at God's inaction. We ask ourselves questions like, "Why, God, aren't you stopping the death and displacement in Ivory Coast? We come up with answers like, "God is inactive because he doesn't exist." Or "God is inactive because he is too busy counting our sins for judgement day.

But there is another explanation in our passage of Scripture this morning.

Why is God so “inactive” in our lives? It is an expression of his kindness, his patience, and his forbearance.

This answer seems very surprising to us. How can all of this suffering and injustice be at all related to kindness, patience or forbearance? To answer this question we need to dust off a couple of ancient but essential stories about the human race.

Move

The first story we have to understand tells us where all of our suffering comes from.

Some people say the suffering of the human race is the wrath of God. The opinion of many who say this is rightly rejected. But we need to revisit this idea, because Paul says it too.

In Romans 1:18 Paul writes, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness..."

This sounds like the kind of action we want from God in situations like Ivory Coast. We want God's justice to be revealed. We want God to make it clear who is right and who is wrong. We want truth to be revealed.

But this passage is also a bit unnerving; and not just because it sounds like a “fire and brimstone” preacher trying to scare us into changing our lives. The problem is the phrase “Wrath of God”. When we hear that phrase we think of something akin to the old Star Trek movie, “The Wrath of Khan.” The trailer for the movie includes the phrase, “At the end of the universe lies the beginning of vengeance.” The wrath of God, then, sounds like uncontrolled anger and rage that destroys the innocent as well as the guilty.

But Paul is actually pointing to something different from vengeance; God’s or ours. Paul uses the word “wrath” to describe God’s “giving us over” to those things that we human beings desire.

"For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles." Therefore God gave them over...

Romans 1:21-24

This same phrase is repeated again in verse 26: "Because of this, God gave them over..." And again in verse 28: "...so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done."

You see, we human beings were created to live life in a joyful relationship with God. But we chose to break that relationship. We ran away from God, setting out to live life in a different way.

God worked to draw us back into relationship with him and to limit the self-inflicted damage of our choices.

God's wrath is revealed when he finally quit limiting the damage. God's wrath is revealed when he "gave us over" so we good jump headlong into the things we truly desire and suffer the consequences. God's wrath is about giving us over to what we have wanted all along.

Where, then, does suffering come from? Not from God. Not from God's inaction. The suffering on this planet comes our desire to run away from God. It begins with our running after things that cause suffering to ourselves and others.

Move

We need to remember the other side of human life as well. We were created to be in a joyful relationship with God. We broke that relationship and brought suffering upon ourselves. God has tried to call us back to him but we have responded by running faster the other way. Finally, God revealed his wrath by letting us have what we want and suffer the consequences. But where is all of this leading? Where will the human race end up?

Some say this is all leading to a day of judgment. We rightly reject those who preach this a little too joyfully. But we need to revisit this idea because Paul says it too.

"...because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed." Romans 2:5

This wrath is of a different kind than the one we have discussed in our previous story. This righteous judgment is not a “giving over” to our base desires. This righteous judgment is an answer to the desire in our heart for justice. It is a time when all will be clear. It is a time when good and evil are out in the open for all to see. No more smoke and mirrors. No more politics. Those who are right will be judged right and those who are wrong will be judged wrong. No more games. No more getting away with things. Finally, justice will be perfect. Justice will be complete. Things will be as they should always have been.

This righteous judgment will occur, not in the present, but at the end of history. It is a justice delayed. This is where human history is going. Our desire for justice and for things to be what they should be will be fulfilled.

Move

With these two stories remembered, we can now go back to the question of God's inactivity.

Why is God so inactive in our lives? It isn't because doesn't exist. Such a belief is an expression of the very thing that brought all of this suffering upon us in the first place. It is nothing more than running away from the One who created us. It isn't that God is too busy counting our sins for judgment day. The suffering and injustice we have brought into this world is already “enough” for judgment. No more time is needed for righteous judgment to be enacted against the human race.

We were created to live a joyful life with God. We broke this

relationship. God pursued us. We ran away. God gave us over to the things we desired. Judgment will come. But in this in-between time God is “inactive” as an expression of his kindness, his patience, and his forbearance. He is giving us an opportunity to stop, to turn around, and to run into his loving embrace.

The people of the Old Testament experienced these characteristics of God. They found God to be kind; to be focused on doing good on our behalf. They found God to be patient; willing to give us more time. They found him to show forbearance; delaying the day of judgment so we might come back to him. God is giving us time to change our ways before that opportunity is taken away forever.

This is the time in which we live.

Move

In the New Testament this kindness, patience and forbearance is completely over the top. Look at what Paul says in Romans 5:8:

"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Not only is God kind, patient and forbearing, but he sent his Son into the midst of our suffering to take on that suffering so that we would have a way out of the hole we dug for ourselves.

Romans 3:25 says, "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood." So many ancient cultures, including the Jewish one, have understood that the problems we have brought upon ourselves were also a problem

with the One who made us. All of these cultures have agreed that these problems with God can be dealt with by the spilling of blood. In the Jewish Temple, for example, animals were sacrificed for the sins of the people. In Christ, however, this idea was turned on its head. The sacrifice of Jesus was not the sacrifice of an animal by humans to God, it was the sacrifice by God of his own son for the sake of humanity. God is solving the problem.

All we have to do now is to believe.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

John 3:16-17

In Christ this kindness, patience and forbearance is magnified. This is the time in which we live.

Implications

If these stories are true then humans judging other humans is the greatest hypocrisy we can commit.

We were created by God for a life of joyful relationship with him. We broke that relationship and the faster he came after us the faster we ran away. He finally quit chasing us and gave us over to our desire. One day he will take away the evil we have all chose to take part in. But for now he is showing us kindness, patience and forbearance; giving us a chance to wander back into his embrace. In Christ he took it upon himself to make it possible for us to come back to him simply by accepting the gift of relationship with him through Jesus. How then can we, who judge one another?

And yet, this is the most common stereotype of Christians.

Paul writes in Romans 2:1:

"You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment have done the same things."

and in Romans 2:5 he says:

"...do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance, and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"

The greatest hypocrisy for humans in this time is to judge others.

Application

Our judgment is not what will enable others to change. It didn't work with us. It is God's kindness that has led us to repentance. It is his kindness that will lead others to repentance as well.

We must continue, as a congregation, to extend the kindness of God to those around us. It begins with us.

So, let's take a moment. Who do you judge? It could be a person. It could be a group of people. Picture them in your mind.

Now consider, has your judgment of them changed them for the better?

Might showing them God's kindness help them confront their problems?

How could you show God's kindness to them this week?

Conclusion

Many of you know that my wife, Cheryl, works with Tirzah International. Tirzah International is a global grassroots network of Christian women who strengthen and encourage other women in sharing the kindness of God.

One of the leaders in Africa is a woman named Madeleine who lives in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.

She wrote recently to the head of Tirzah about their response to the crisis:

Dear sister Emily,

I would like to sincerely thank you for your email which made me feel ok, because I know that some people dear to our hearts have been praying for me, my family and my country. Once again thank you to you all, my sisters.

TIRZAH Women in Côte d'Ivoire are working. As you noticed in the news you have been seeing on your screens, women and children have been running away from the places where fights are. We have made three groups of Tirzah Sisters:

* A group in charge of those running out of Abidjan who are at the stations (car stations), those women will have to give water and some bread and food and also share the good news of GOD.

* A group of women who will announce the Good news to young people called patriots (many of whom were armed by Mr. Gbagbo) some of them die without knowing Christ.

* Some will announce the good news to soldiers and rebels (in the armies of Mr. Ouatarra) all the people who are in army and does not know God.

In a time of suffering and injustice, these women are living testaments to the love of God in Christ. They are living according to the kindness, patience and forbearance for this time in which we live.

As we move forward together, brothers and sisters, let us follow their example. No matter what comes our way, may we hold to the words of Proverbs 3:3:

Let love and faithfulness never leave you;

bind them around your neck,

write them on the tablet of your heart.

May we never forget the story of God's love.

Amen.