

“LIKE A CHILD AT HOME”

Robin E. Lostetter

First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ

September 11, 2011

Scripture: Ps 23, Selected passages from I John (1:1-5, 2:9-10; 3:16-18, 23-24; 4:1,7-17)

This weekend our congregation has spent a lot of time focusing on death. But scripture is all about life. We are taught about “life after death”, which I prefer to consider “life after life”. We’re told that Yahweh identified himself as the God of the Living – which can be understood as either the God of the ancestors who were “caught up into heaven” and therefore were not considered dead, or as the God that is not an idol created by humans, such as the household gods or the Golden Calf. And we are asked to “choose life”, in choosing to follow this God of the Living.

And as Christians, Presbyterians, in the Reformed Tradition, one of our mainstay theological beliefs is the Sovereignty of God. That is, God will triumph over evil in the end – that there is no question to this outcome. That God will not be domesticated by humans . . . in other words, we may seek to know the mind of God, but we dare not dictate it.

Many of you have heard my story of the community worship service that took place in Point Pleasant Beach shortly after 9-11. All the local clergy gathered on the dais, and each of us took a part – reading scripture or leading a prayer. And then one of our more conservative brothers gave the sermon. I will never forget my outrage when he stated that “anyone who died in the Towers without having first accepted Jesus Christ, was damned and going to hell.”

My first reaction was to get up and either leave or challenge the preacher, and when I looked at my colleague and senior pastor . . . I could see that we were of one mind.

There are several problems with that preacher’s statement. For one thing, his cocksureness. For another, the total lack of pastoral concern for the listeners. And then there are the theological concerns about hell and about limiting God’s salvific power.

I don’t want to get into the issue of “hell” today, but that is a topic I’d like to examine in our next Lenten study. So for now, please put that aside. What I challenge, more than anything, is an assumption that our salvation is limited by our earthly human consciousness, such that every human being on the planet must consciously accept Jesus – as named by us in our language – before earthly death, in order to obtain eternal life. After all, Jesus said he had sheep of other flocks, and he said he came to save the whole world. Who am I to determine how or when that is accomplished?

As corny as it may seem, the image which continues to come back into my mind, thinking of the fallen towers, is that hazy photo-shopped image of Jesus arising amid the smoke and ash above the skyline. It brings to mind the poetic statement that “God doth sit by us and moan”, and the statement by preacher William Sloan Coffin, on the occasion of his son’s death, that “ God’s heart was the first of all hearts to break.”^{1 2}

But even moreso, one must turn to the beloved 23rd Psalm. In the King James Version, we read, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” As I remind folk at funerals, one important word in that sentence is “through” . . .

we go “through” the valley of the shadow of death. Death is not the final destination.

But in today’s context, let us also note “for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” The rod and staff were the shepherd’s tools to guide and/or save a lost or endangered sheep. Do we have the arrogance to presume that Jesus’ ability to be our shepherd ends when we take our last earthly breath? The answer, as today’s anthem paraphrases it, is “While he affords his aid, I cannot yield to fear.”

Now this may sound suspiciously like Roman theology about purgatory or limbo . . . but even those constructs have sought to define and put limits on God’s sovereignty. I believe that, in the final analysis, it remains a mystery. But a mystery that must conform to our understanding of a compassionate God, as revealed in scripture, and most immediately in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

For me, perhaps the most poignant aspect of 9-11 was the action of the passengers on the jet over Shanksville, PA. In Jesus’ words, in the Gospel of John, I believe we find both the impetus for that heroic action, and an affirmation of God’s amazing and unconditional love:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” (*John 15:12-17*)

And in today’s reading from The First Letter of John, chapter 3 (16-18), we heard:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

For me, that is the key to our response to 9-11. We are to love in truth and action, as modeled by the one who lived among us, who ate with outcasts, and who died a criminal’s death on the cross. Today’s lectionary reading, which I chose not to use, included the passage from Matthew where Jesus says to forgive seventy times seven . . . the perfect seven to the seventh power. (18:22) And even on the cross, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” If we are to walk in the feet of such a Shepherd, we must keep the commandment to love – above any other commandment. To love God and to love neighbor . . . whether Muslim, Hindu, Fundamentalist, Unitarian, or atheist . . . as we love ourselves. That love has been demonstrated to us by Jesus dying for those he called his friends – our ancestors in the faith. That love has been demonstrated by his forgiveness, by his seeking community with the “other” — how can we strive to do anything less?

It isn’t easy. Forgiveness doesn’t happen all at once. In fact, sometimes it may not happen at all. But it is in the seeking to forgive, in the effort to love, and in the knowledge that God first loved – and chose – us.

Friends, when we at last come to life after life, which is our true home, if we have made the attempt to pattern our lives after the model of Jesus, we will indeed feel like a child – finally – at home.

ENDNOTES

1. “On Another’s Woe” from Songs of Innocence by William Blake

Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief?

Can I see a falling tear,
And not feel my sorrow's share?
Can a father see his child
Weep, nor be with sorrow filled?

Can a mother sit and hear
An infant groan, an infant fear?
No, no! never can it be!
Never, never can it be!

And can He who smiles on all
Hear the wren with sorrows small,
Hear the small bird's grief and care,
Hear the woes that infants bear -

And not sit beside the nest,
Pouring pity in their breast,
And not sit the cradle near,
Weeping tear on infant's tear?

And not sit both night and day,
Wiping all our tears away?
O no! never can it be!
Never, never can it be!

He doth give His joy to all:
He becomes an infant small,
He becomes a man of woe,
He doth feel the sorrow too.

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Maker is not by:
Think not thou canst weep a tear,
And thy Maker is not near.

O He gives to us His joy,
That our grief He may destroy:
Till our grief is fled and gone
He doth sit by us and moan.

2. As quoted in my August 14, 2011 sermon:

The famous “Eulogy for Alex”, delivered by the Reverend William Sloane Coffin to his congregation at Riverside Church in New York City, ten days after his son, Alex, was killed in a car accident:

As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm, my son — Alexander — who to his friends was a real day-brightener, and to his family "fair as a star when only one is shining in the

sky" — my twenty-four-year-old Alexander, who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave.

Among the healing flood of letters that followed his death was one carrying this wonderful quote from the end of Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms": "The world breaks everyone, then some become strong at the broken places."

My own broken heart is mending, and largely thanks to so many of you, my dear parishioners; for if in the last week I have relearned one lesson, it is that love not only begets love, it transmits strength.

When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died I was sitting in the living room of my sister's house outside of Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking, middle-aged woman, carrying about eighteen quiches. When she saw me, she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, "I just don't understand the will of God." Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. "I'll say you don't, lady!" I said.

For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an inordinate amount of time delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, and muteness. . . . violent deaths, such as the one Alex died — to understand those is a piece of cake. As his younger brother put it simply, standing at the head of the casket at the Boston funeral, "You blew it, buddy. You blew it." The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is "It is the will of God." Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."