



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 3RD LENT
EZEKIEL 33:1-7-20 AND LUKE 13:1-9
MARCH 20, 2022

“WHAT ARE WE LIKE AS SINNERS?”

John Calvin once remarked that our knowledge of God is unbreakably linked to a knowledge of ourselves. I think Calvin means if we don't see ourselves clearly, we won't, indeed can't, see God clearly. It is suggested the decline in the worship of God in our country signals a decline in the sense of our need for and dependence on God. But I suggest it may be because we have become a people who wish to avoid looking at ourselves. Both our Old Testament and Gospel lessons today beg self-examination. No, they demand it.

The prophet Ezekiel discusses otherwise “righteous persons” who suddenly sin – betraying, if not immediately to themselves, surely to God, who they think themselves to be. God tells Ezekiel not to punish these people, but to warn them, hold them accountable. If they are righteous – defined in the Old Testament as being in right relationship with God, then they would welcome such accountability. We are, as Cain discovered when God spoke to him about the matter of the lifeless body of his brother, one another's keeper.”

Who certain questioners of our Lord Jesus were, isn't stated, though the smart money is on the famously self-righteous Pharisees. Regardless, our Lord is asked about people who suffered at the hands of Pilate and, in the case of the tower collapse, poor construction or a sudden, big wind. Give us a line on their sin Jesus – what did they do to deserve it? Does not Ezekiel say a sinner will die for their sins?

Jesus of course will have nothing of it. Never mind them he asks – who are you, and what catastrophe do you deserve? And even if you avoid them, don't assume it's because you deserve to. Much to the shock of those inquirers, Jesus knows, and we need to remember, the gate between sin and suffering swings both ways. Some people step into hardship and tragedy by their behavior, true, but there is lots of sin in otherwise composed, peaceful and prosperous lives which, if unacknowledged, simply postpones tragedy. That is what our Lord says.

Postmodern people like to define themselves – sometimes with extraordinary precision. But what do you expect from a culture in which it takes some people two minutes just to tell the person at Starbucks how they like their coffee! Christians believe the word of God defines us. For everyone, no matter what else, the first answer to the question “who are you” should be “a fallen creature of God.” But that isn't how most people would answer that question, including many in this room. That's the problem our lessons confront today. Most people place themselves in categories of their liking, and from those definitions tend to demarcate themselves from others. Again, witness Jesus' questioners.

Our nation continues to be divided on the basis of how we define ourselves - race and class being the two of the most common, and unsurprisingly folks are making a cottage industry of finding others – sexual orientation, gender identity, political affiliation, relationship status, vaccination status...the list goes on. Despite the angst we feel about all this, we still do a reasonably good job of living with one another. But there is a clear spiritual danger when we try to define ourselves to God. If some aspect of our “personhood” doesn’t like God’s ways, we don’t follow them. Ezekiel’s audience protested “*the way of the Lord is not just.*”

Insert “*reasonable, practical, intelligent, logical*”, just about any qualifier you want, and you have the same statement - “*I don’t like it.*” This is what we are like as sinners. So when we so to speak “democratize God” – that is make God answerable to all the other ways we define ourselves, we, as we say in our weekly confession, “*deceive ourselves, the truth is not in us.*”

Apart from that word of God and the gospel of Christ, we are tempted to say “we have no sin”, that we are not wrong but misunderstood, not fallen, just unique, or fragile, so we act out. But are we any better off being this way? If we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, and if John Calvin is right, then we deceive ourselves about God as well. We imagine God to be harsh, intolerant, vengeful, overbearing. If we don’t see ourselves properly, we’ll never see God properly.

But if we confess our sins...if we see ourselves the way we are, we will see God as He is. We can then confess, “*God who is faithful and just...*”. In God and God alone can these two exist simultaneously and perfectly. Critics of the Bible and of Christian faith often use worn-out accusation that God is heartless, callous, inhuman. Ezekiel 33:11 says however “*that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.*” In the Hebrew language, the word “pleasure” can also mean “delight.” That word is “chafatz” and the word for mercy (also “steadfast love”) is “chesed” – and Micah 7:18 there is this wonderful little word play – it says God “chafatz chesed”, *God delights in steadfast love.*

Psalm 1 says the righteous person “chafatz torah Yahweh”, they “*delight in the law of the Lord.*” Of the Messiah, God’s anointed, Psalm 40:8 says he “chafatz” (delighted) to do God’s will, and thus, and only because of thus Isaiah 53:10, the most famous of the “servant songs” of Isaiah, can say the Lord was “chafatz” (pleased) to cause his Son to suffer, and though he makes his life a guilt offering, he and his offspring (his children by faith) will see their days prolonged forever.

To see ourselves properly, we must say we are fallen children of God – that we might then say, “*but God delights in mercy, God delights in saving people like me from my sins.*” Only when we say the former – I am fallen, sinful - can we understand how astonishing it is to be able to say “*but I know Him in whom God delights.*” “I am a Christian, I am not just fallen, I am forgiven.” What are we like as sinners? Well, if Luke be our guide, we’re “unproductive” - users of soil God could easily claim for someone else. But as redeemed, we’re given over and placed in the hands of Jesus. And, as I’m sure you know, He does rather good work with his hands