

“AT ODDS WITH JESUS”

Jeremiah 15:15-21, Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28, Proper 17-A
September 3, 2017

St. Paul was speaking out of his own experience one day: “If anyone is in Christ...” You see, **St. Paul was a human being**; a human being who was **forever grateful** that he had been **given a second birth into the kingdom of God**. It **wasn't** something that he could ever have anticipated or was expecting to happen to him, not simply because he was a person like many people today—who are totally indifferent towards the Gospel! **He was a violent persecutor of the early Church.**

Paul certainly knew that this unbelievable **gift of God's eternal salvation** was not something that he had earned for himself, the way a **boy scout** works to receive his **next merit badge** or the way that a **girl scout** strives to win some **extra brownie points**.

It all happened by the grace of God, when there was not only **SOMETHING** but actually **SOMEONE**, who stopped him dead in his tracks one day, while he was traveling down the road to Damascus to stir up some more trouble for the believers in Christ who were living there.

When the Risen Christ appeared to him on that road—**WITH ALL OF THE BRIGHT BRILLIANCE OF HIS RESURRECTION LIGHT**—Paul was temporarily blinded, blinded for three days. Another man who had become a Christian, named **Judas**—not Judas Iscariot **BUT** a different Judas—who was living in Damascus, **took compassion** on him and gave him a place to stay in his very own home. In the meantime, God was speaking to another disciple, living in Damascus—a man named Ananias whom God had told through a dream to go Judas' house, who was living on **STRAIT STREET**. There he would find Saul of Tarsus and speak the good news of Jesus Christ. And immediately, these little scales fell off the eyes of the apostle Paul. This is why we love to sing: **“I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see!”**

Ananias then baptized Paul into the Christian faith, making him a member of the Church. And in some respects, **Paul's life was changed immediately, but in other respects Paul's life continued to change for the better all throughout the rest of his days!**

When Paul says: **“If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation,”** he is teaching us—that the Holy Spirit goes to work in the life of believers—to make them more and more, each day, into the likeness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; **not with respect to their outward physical appearance**, because these are changes that take place within a person, from the inside out—to **give that person a new heart and a new mind**; fashioned more and more into the likeness of Jesus' own heart and mind every day.

The Holy Spirit of God, who is always carrying out his great work of sanctification among us...**IS ALWAYS AT WORK WITHIN US TO GIVE US MORE HEALTHY ATTITUDES...AND TO**

BLESS US WITH RELATIONSHIPS, ESPECIALLY WITHIN THE BODY OF CHRIST--THAT ARE MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL AND REWARDING.

Brothers and sisters, whenever I begin to prepare these messages to share with you on Sunday mornings, I always begin, by making a careful study of each of the three Scripture lessons chosen to be read among us on any given Sunday. As I initially studied the Scripture lessons for today—I found myself very much drawn to the words of our Gospel lesson, where we obviously witness Peter, at this point, very much being at odds with Jesus. But let me tell you that this was certainly not the first time, and it certainly would not be the last time, that neither Peter nor many of the twelve disciples would find themselves at odds with Jesus!

- (1) **People were bringing children** to him that he might touch them and bless them; but the **disciples spoke to these parents “sternly”** trying to discourage the whole thing. But soon, **they found themselves at odds** with Jesus, “Let the little children come to me...”
- (2) **Feeding of the 5000**, the disciples came to Jesus and instructed him to send the thousands of people there that day away, but they **soon found themselves at odds with Jesus**—because he told the disciples: “You give them something to eat!”
- (3) **Already at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, when he was invited back to his home synagogue in Nazareth** to preach the sermon, people found themselves at odds with Jesus, because he challenged their faith. So much at odds with Jesus that they literally and physically drug him out of the synagogue and tried to throw him over a cliff to his certain death below—but **Jesus slipped through the crowd and away from them**, because his time had not yet come!
- (4) And these disciples certainly found themselves **at odds with Jesus** when they were arguing among themselves, as to which one of them was **the greatest on the eve of our Lord’s crucifixion.** *“It shall not be so among you,” Jesus told them. For whoever would be great among you must become the servant of all, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many!”*

SO, WHAT DOES A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD-GOD LOOK LIKE? WHAT OF KIND OF HEALTHY ATTITUDES ARE THERE, THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT OF GOD LONGS TO PLACE WITHIN US STILL TODAY—TO IMPROVE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS, AND ESPECIALLY WITH OTHERS WHO ARE IN THE BODY OF CHRIST?

ISN’T THIS THE GREAT BEAUTY TO BE FOUND IN OUR EPISTLE LESSON TODAY--WHERE ST. PAUL FLESHES ALL OF THIS OUT FOR US--IN LANGUAGE THAT WE CAN HOPEFULLY UNDERSTAND!

FIRST OF ALL, ST PAUL SAYS, “LET LOVE BE GENUINE.”

The Greek word in the New Testament that is translated as “genuine” here—let love be genuine—could be translated most literally as: **“WITHOUT WAX.”** *Let your love be without wax.*

In that first century world, a **potter could unscrupulously hide cracks and imperfections in the defective jars and bowls, HE HAD MADE, by filling in those cracks with wax.** It could be done so effectively done that unless someone looked at that vessel very intently, by **holding it up in front of a bright light, no one would ever discover the imperfection.** One could even purchase a defective vessel, however, and not *know it was defective until it was placed over the fire to cook a meal—when the wax would suddenly melt your bowl would then break into two pieces—so the food you were cooking, sadly enough, would also drop down into your fire!*

What I hear St Paul saying is that genuine love does not change when relationships heat up. Under the heat of fire, good relationships can actually be strengthened with God's blessing when they become welded together even more strongly!

SECONDLY, PAUL SAYS, "ABHOR WHAT IS EVIL; HOLD FAST TO WHAT IS GOOD."

This is good advice: **BECAUSE IN ANY RELATIONSHIPS, WE CAN EASILY ALLOW ANYTHING THAT IS NOT GOOD—TO TOTALLY OVERSHADOW EVERYTHING ELSE!** While it is true that **LOVE never requires us to approve that which is inappropriate**, it does call us to know the difference between good and evil—and for us to hold fast to what is good!

THIRDLY, PAUL SAYS TO, "OUTDO ONE ANOTHER IN SHOWING HONOR."

It's almost as if St. Paul is paraphrasing Jesus' presentation to us of the **GOLDEN RULE** that is presented two times to us in the Gospels—first in **Matthew 7:12** where Jesus says: *"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets!"* And says again in **Luke 6:31**: *"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!"*

Jesus did not say, nor did St Paul ever say in presenting Jesus' teachings to the Church: **"Do as they did do unto you! Or, not even, "Do whatever it is that you sure feel like doing unto them at that time!"**

Later in this text Paul says: *"Return no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all" (v. 17)!*

I hear St. Paul asking us: "Would you like to feel better about yourself? Then **try honoring someone else who is not necessarily honoring you!** We've heard the saying before—but who among us—really know who said it first: *"If you can't say something nice about another person, saying nothing at all!"*

President Carter attributed these words to his mother, Lillian, who taught them to him and who always did her best to live by them. **President Clinton attributed these words to his mother, Virginia**, who taught them to him and who also did her best, he said, to live by them too. But let's not forget that **Thumper, a Rabbit, spoken them to Bambi, a white-tailed deer, in the Disney Class motion picture "BAMBI" that was first released on August 12, 1942.**

FOURTHLY, PAUL SAYS: "THAT WE NEED TO STRIVE TO TAKE THE INITIATIVE IN REPARING OUR BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS!"

What else could St. Paul be getting at when he says to us: *"Do not be slothful in zeal. Be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in tribulation. Be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:11-18)!

Take the first step. Be Christ to the other person. Live out Christ in daily events. By nature we are at odds with each other, because by nature we are at odds with the God who created us and has loved us with an everlasting love.

FIFTHLY, PAUL SAYS, THAT IN ADDITION TO OUR DOING OUR BEST TO REFLECT GOD'S LOVE TO OTHERS THAT HAS FIRST BEEN SHOWN TO US IN JESUS CHRIST—WE SHOULD ALWAYS ADD FORGIVENESS.

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written: ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’ (v. 19)!”

“To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink!’”

At this particular place in the New Testament, forgiveness is being expressed by a person's willingness to let go of a need for revenge!

It means that you and I are ready to move on even though we may have been treated poorly.

Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that you finally cave in, or acknowledge that all of another person's accusations against you are, in fact, warranted. It is not necessarily that you announce publicly a personal recognition of wrong-doing on your part. It certainly doesn't mean that you are weak and have no backbone, spiritually speaking! Forgiveness means that you have chosen to let it go. Most of all, forgiveness means that you are going to trust God to handle, what you can't handle! Then, what follows next, has to be one of the strangest passages, perhaps, in the whole Bible: *“For by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Vv. 20-21)!* *This is a figure of speech. It means that the person might end up feeling embarrassed and guilty because you are so nice when he or she has been so wrong and that this just might help that other person change for the better!*

In our OLD TESTAMENT LESSON TODAY (Jeremiah 15:15-21) the Prophet Jeremiah certainly finds himself at odds with God. Even though Jeremiah seems to be momentarily complimenting himself because he believes he has faithfully answered God's call to ministry upon his life. Jeremiah also knew that he was not being treated respectfully. His words, even as the Word of God, only seemed to be falling on deaf ears!

At his point Jeremiah is very disillusioned about the whole thing and so he cries out to God: *“Why is my pain unceasing and my wounds incurable; refusing to be healed?”*

But, brothers and sisters, while I cannot speak for you, or know what your assessment of Jeremiah's situation might be—but I can't help but believe that **Jeremiah is going too far when he further cries out to the Almighty One: “Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail!”** Some translations say: *“Will you be to me like a deceitful brook that dries up midstream” (Jeremiah 1518)?*

But here is a lesson I hope that Jeremiah took to heart, and here is a lesson that I pray you and I will also take to heart!

Though God corrects Jeremiah and tells him to stop doing, what some people in the use of vernacular language today might classify as “talking trash;” God is willing to forgive him!

“Jeremiah, if you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you and deliver you,” declares the Lord. *“I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless!”*

And did you witness it? Did you see it for yourself—how suddenly and *quickly* Simon Peter who has just been praised our Lord for saying to Jesus: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”* a few moments later, *ends up being totally at odds with Jesus? “From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he MUST go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke the Son of God, saying: “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you!”

But Jesus turned and said to Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! For, you are a hindrance to me! For, you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man!”*

Yes, Jeremiah thought he had a bone to pick with God, but Jeremiah’s God did not forsake him!

Yes, Peter thought he had a bone to pick with Jesus, but Jesus did not abandon Peter nor excommunicate him. **Yes, Jesus corrects Peter! But Jesus, having loved Peter, and Jesus having called upon Peter to become one of his disciples—still kept Peter within the fold of his sheep.**

Jesus, no doubt, had to keep on correcting Peter—as he does when he tells Peter not to become so self-confident, that he loses his ability to put his utmost faith and confidence in God. You remember how Jesus cautions Peter, *“Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me thrice.”* But Peter remains just as stubborn an obstinate to Jesus as ever!

Jesus just kept on loving Peter, teaching Peter, correcting Peter! Moreover, Jesus went to the cross to pay for Peter’s sins and my sins and your sins! Having died he was raised from the dead on the third day to assure us that God accepted the price Jesus has paid on our behalf!

Christ Jesus, our Savior, continued to keep Peter within his fold—and Jesus kept showing Peter the way until his mind was finally, fully, and forever set on heavenly things!

So let me close by quoting to you some of my favorite words of the Apostle Paul that he wrote to the Church at Colossae one day: *“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God! Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that re on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God! When Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory!”* Amen