

## GRATITUDE Sermon for 6/12/16

By Rev. Dr. Donald Algeo

1 Kings: 21:1-10, 15-21a

Psalm 32

Galatians 2:15-21

Luke 7:36-50

Most of us are probably old enough to remember a great TV cartoon called Rocky and Bullwinkle. Bullwinkle was a moose and Rocky was a flying squirrel and they could both talk like humans and often said very funny things. But the other thing aside from the clever dialogue that stood out about the series were the two villains, who both happened to actually *be* human. They were vaguely Russian types named Boris and Natasha. Boris was a squat little guy who looked like Peter Lorre, while Natasha was tall and dark-haired and slinky and was always smoking a cigarette in a long cigarette holder. The writers always gave them their share of funny lines as well.

I don't remember specific plots, but the general formula for each episode was always the same. Boris and Natasha come up with some devilish scheme that almost succeeds until Rocky and Bullwinkle somehow thwart it at the last possible moment. It seems like oftentimes the episode ended with Boris and Natasha dunked in water somewhere, like a lake or a swamp, with water dripping from Boris's hat and the cigarette holder hanging limply from Natasha's mouth, smoke curling up from the extinguished cigarette. I think I remember little fish often popping out of Boris' mouth as a kind of punctuation mark to the scene.

I'm reminded of Boris and Natasha when I read about Ahab and Jezebel in First and Second Kings. They are definitely the most dastardly married couple in the Old Testament, as our reading for this morning from First Kings illustrates. When one of his subjects refuses to sell his vineyard to King Ahab, Ahab's wife, Jezebel, comes up with a scheme to have the poor man killed and his land confiscated, a sort of early and brutal exercise of eminent domain.

In the cartoon, Rocky and Bullwinkle always manage somehow to foil the villainous couple's scheme. In the Bible, the prophet Elijah is the hero. In the episode recounted in our reading this morning, Elijah doesn't really foil the nefarious plot so much as provide reassurance that justice will in the end be served, that both Ahab and Jezebel will pay a heavy and appropriate price for their villainy. Thus he prophesies that both will meet a violent end, and their bodies will be consumed by dogs.

What stands out for me in this episode from Kings about Ahab and Jezebel is how well it illustrates the way God is generally characterized in the Old Testament, as well as the way in which that characterization harmonizes with our normal moral sentiments.

What the episode assures us is that God – whose point of view is represented by Elijah – that God will see to it that Ahab and Jezebel will get their comeuppances. God is presented as the great balancer of the scales. Wickedness, even when by human measure it seems to succeed, will always be returned in kind. God will see to it. God will balance the scales. God will enforce the rule that, as you sow, so shall you reap.

And that I think is the preeminent characteristic of God's relationship with humanity as we find it in the Old Testament. Over and over again, we find God worshiped as the punisher of the wicked and rewarder of the good. "God shall arise," the Psalmist assures us:

*...his enemies shall be scattered, and those who hate him shall flee before him! As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away, as wax melts before the fire, so the wicked shall perish before God! (68)*

The great instruction of the prophets of Israel was how all the nation's troubles were in fact due to the justice of God, bringing them low because of their wickedness. From the local setbacks of the early period recorded in the books of the Judges and the Kings, down to the tremendous national calamities of the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions with their terrible aftermaths of dispersion and exile, the explanation is always the same: God is balancing the books, returning wrong to Israel for the wrong it has done.

The very concluding words of the entire Old Testament make reference to this most fundamental understanding of God, as the one who stands ready to crack the whip, to balance the moral books, and it does so by invoking our old friend Elijah, the quintessential merciless moral enforcer among all the prophets:

*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. (Malachi 4:5-6)*

And that's why, I think, most of us cheer – or at least feel better – about the Ahab/Jezebel scheme when Elijah steps in and delivers his prophesy. It's the same reason we cheer at the movies when the bad guys finally get theirs. Our normal moral sensibilities are satisfied when we see justice being done, and by justice we mean evil receiving its just desserts.

Or to put it another way, we admire the God of the Old Testament most, I think, because he satisfies our human desire for justice. Our hope and faith in God boils down to our hope and faith that our own goodness will be rewarded with goodness and the wickedness of others will be punished.

I've dwelt on this episode at some length, because I'd like to contrast it with the picture of God we find in the story about Jesus we find recounted in our passage from the Gospel of Luke this morning.

In this episode from our Lord's ministry, we find Him sitting down as an invited guest at the table of a Pharisee named Simon. The third main actor in the scene is a woman who is described as a sinner, almost certainly a prostitute, and who is definitely not one of the invited guests, but who participates anyway by washing and anointing Christ's feet. When Simon looks askance at what's happening, Jesus tells him a story about two men who had their debts forgiven, one of them a much greater debt than the other. When Simon allows that the man whose debt was greater would love their mutual debt-holder more than the other, Jesus proceeds to contrast the way the woman has been treating him with the relatively disrespectful way Simon himself had treated him, and concludes by drawing a moral about forgiveness, and announcing the forgiveness of the woman's sins.

There are many lessons to learn from this story, but what I'd like to focus on is the illustration it provides of the way Christ deals with human failure and shortcoming and moral obtuseness and spiritual fear and pride...with all those varieties of less than Godly human behavior and perspective that the Bible sums up with the single word: sin.

Let's begin with a premise: Jesus was God incarnate. He was the God-man, He was the one true God, who came to dwell among us as one of us, to show

us what God would be as a human, what God is as a human. He came to show us the face of God.

With that premise in mind, let's contrast the way God is represented as dealing with sin in the case of Ahab and Jezebel with the way God deals with it in the case of Simon and the unnamed prostitute of the city.

In the former case, as we saw, God deals with sin by punishing the wrongdoers. The behavior of Ahab and Jezebel violated the moral law, and just as violations of the law in the civil and criminal spheres merit punishment, so also in the moral sphere. And God is the guarantor of that punishment.

But what about in the episode Luke recounts in our passage this morning?

First, let's be clear about whose sin is the issue here. The way many Biblical commentators interpret the story, Jesus is pointing to the enormity of the woman's sin and attributing her affectionate behavior to that enormous sin being forgiven. As the forgiveness of the greater debt generates greater gratitude, so the woman's behavior towards Jesus is her reaction to the magnitude of her forgiveness. Simon's lack of affectionate respect, by contrast then, according to this reading, must indicate a lack of forgiveness, presumably because he has not sought it.

But I think that interpretation of what happened that evening misses the mark, and that misinterpretation in turn prevents us from appreciating the great and deep contrast this episode illustrates between the Old and the New Testament understandings of God. Let me explain.

I think when Christ asks Simon his question about the two debtors, one of whom has a much greater debt forgiven than the other, I think it is Simon who is being asked to see himself as the greater debtor.

I once had occasion to make the acquaintance of a prostitute who worked out of her home in a very poor neighborhood in Herakleon, the capital of the Greek island of Crete. It wasn't a very glamorous job. Her brothel consisted of her home, which had a total of three rooms. The men from the neighborhood would sit around the walls on benches in the small living room, and when one man would come through the hanging blanket that served as a door to the bedroom, the next man in line would get off the bench and take his place. Since all the living quarters on the narrow street where this woman lived looked the same – just doors in a wall – sure enough there was a red lamp

above the outer door to her place, although in this case it was just a wooden image of a lamp that had been painted red.

At a certain point, I learned a little about her history, and as you might expect it was pretty sad, involving a couple of kids, a husband who had either died or abandoned her – that was never quite clear – a family too poor to be of any help, no marketable skills. So prostitution is what she did to survive.

I suspect the woman washing Christ's feet that day had a backstory pretty much like this woman I knew in Crete. Both would have found themselves, out of necessity, pretty near the bottom of the social ladder, without any respectable friends, shunned by their own churches, a future almost unimaginably bleak. Maybe the woman in our story also had some symbol hanging above her door, so that everybody passing by would be aware of who and what she was.

And I am certain Christ – who can read the heart, and who cares much more what goes on there than what goes on in the flesh – I am certain that Christ would have had the same response to both women, to regard the sins of both – however many they may have been – as trivial.

No, it is not the prostitute in our story whose debt is the greater, who has separated herself farther from God, whose inner light is more seriously threatened by the darkness. It is Simon.

And so Christ says to Simon, look at this woman's response to my acceptance of her, to the absence of separation between me and herself. Let this woman be the model for you, Simon, my friend, whose sin is much more serious than hers, whose debt is much greater. I am in your house, sitting at your table, eating your food. The very fact of my presence here is a manifestation of the reality of the gift of grace I make available to everyone. It is yours, as well as hers, whether you're aware of it or not. The difference between you and this woman is not that she has been forgiven and you have not; the difference is that she is aware of being forgiven and you are not...not yet.

We are told at many places in the Gospel accounts that Jesus made a practice of dining with sinners, and here we have Him dining with one, and a great one at that, if our interpretation is correct. It's important, I think, to note that Jesus speaks to him by name. "Simon, I have something to say to you." Jesus only calls a handful of people by their name in the Gospel accounts, and the others are all people who are close to Him, people He loves in the ordinary human way we love our friends.

The whole mood and mode of operation we have here is in marked contrast to what we found in our earlier account. Christ is not reproofing Simon, He's educating him; He's not balancing the scales of justice, He's unfolding the wondrous possibilities of forgiveness and gratitude. Like a bee traveling from one buttercup to the next, He's pollinating one friend with the love of another.

The response of Elijah's God to sin is to punish it; the response of Christ to sin is to forgive it, and to open the eyes of the spiritually blind to the reality of that forgiveness. That is the difference between the old covenant of Law and the new covenant of Grace and Mercy.

And that is why we pray this morning, Father, for those of us and for those of the world whose spiritual eyes remain closed to who Christ is and what He did, and especially to what He did on the cross. We pray that you open our eyes and theirs, the way some flowers are opened by the touch of the sun, so that they can receive the sun's full warmth and nourishment, and can add their unique and full beauty to your world. We ask for the special blessing of an awareness and appreciation of the debt we have been forgiven, and we ask for the removal of whatever barriers remain in each of us to the loving gratitude that is the only appropriate companion to that awareness. Amen.