CHRIST’S EXASPERATION Sermon for August 14

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 82

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

You may have heard about the three friends who decided to go hunting together.  One was a lawyer, one a doctor, and the other a pastor.  As they were walking, along came a big buck.  The three of them shot simultaneously.  Immediately the buck dropped to the ground and all three rushed up to see how big it actually was.  Upon reaching it they found out that it was dead but had only one bullet hole.  Thus a debate followed concerning whose buck it was.  5 minutes later a game officer came by and asked what the problem was.    The doctor told him their reason for the debate.  The officer told them he would take a look maybe he could tell them.  5 seconds later he said he knew who shot the buck.  He said with much confidence, "The pastor shot the buck!"    They all wondered how he knew that so quickly.  The officer said, "Easy. The bullet went in one ear and out the other."

The synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - are sometimes said to show us the human side of Jesus, and the gospel of John to show us the spiritual side, and I think to some degree that's fair. The twelfth chapter of Luke which we've been working through for the last three weeks is a good example. I think what it demonstrates pretty convincingly is that the Lord could get pretty exasperated at His listeners, and did not shrink from letting them know it. From His point of view, His urgent message to them was going in one ear and out the other.

The gospels are full of incidents that show this dimension of Christ's character. Remember in Caesarea, when Peter had just in the power of the Spirit borne witness to Christ's divinity, and Jesus then proceeds to introduce the next element of his teaching, that the Son of Man must suffer and die. Remember how Peter throws his arm around his shoulder and guides him away from the others, and he's saying, "Now, now, Jesus. Better not to be such a gloomy Gus." And Christ basically shakes his arm off and rolls his eyes and exasperatedly tells Peter to sit back down at his desk and start taking notes again.

Or how about the time they were all in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus is sound asleep in the bow after a hard day's work healing people when a storm comes up and the disciples panic: Lord, wake up! Don't you care that we're about to die? And Jesus in so many words says: You woke me up for this? What's wrong with you guys? And he rebukes the storm and goes back to sleep, probably muttering to himself.

That's the same sense that comes through to me reading chapter twelve in Luke. Earlier in the chapter, Luke tells us about how someone in the crowd calls out to Jesus: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." And our Lord's immediate reaction is one of exasperation. He says: "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over the two of you?"

And what follows through the chapter, through a series of teachings, is Christ illustrating that there is a distinction that it is vital every one of his listeners grasp: a distinction between earthly treasure and heavenly treasure; between earthly worries and heavenly worries; between earthly vigilance and spiritual vigilance; between earthly care-taking and the care-taking of one's soul.

And then he concludes all these teachings with the great passage of almost violent exasperation that opens our reading for this morning:

*"I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!...Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!...You hypocrites" - he shouts at them - "...why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"*

Has everything I've said, everything I've been trying to teach you...has it all just gone in one ear and out the other?

Well what exactly was this distinction that Christ so urgently desired to communicate to his followers, to the point that he grew angry at them for not getting it? What teaching had they failed to grasp? What was it that never took root in their brains as it passed between their ears?

If I were to put it in a somewhat awkward phrase, I would say that it's the distinction between the material world and the spiritual world. Let me try to unwrap that, because I know it’s exactly the kind of claim that, if our roles were reversed, I would be apt to tune out!

What is the material world? It's just the world around us, the one we see and smell and hear, the one we are born into and spend our lives in and then leave when our time is over. It's what we call physical reality, including whatever the underlying gravitational and electro-magnetic forces they are that bind it all together?

And what is the spiritual world? That's much harder to say, because we don't have a shared vocabulary to discuss it with. Even calling it the 'spiritual' world is cheating, because it's borrowing a 'material' word, *spirit* - or 'breath' or 'wind' in some older languages- because they're the material words we use to describe material things that are vague and insubstantial and invisible. Really the only thing we can say without having to speculate is that the spiritual world is where God reigns, and Jesus lives, and where our own spirits will spend eternity.

But what Christ came to tell us, and to prove to us, is that the spiritual world, the world where God reigns, is real, is in some way more real than the world we live in, and that we can and, if we are to be his followers, we must begin to conform our earthly, material lives to it, starting today.

Now, is that such a difficult thing to understand and accept? We still haven’t arrived at the source of Christ’s exasperation.

Suppose Christ had lined up His disciples and asked them, "Do you believe in God?" All of them would have said Yes! Do you believe in the Kingdom of God, a spiritual realm where God reigns? Again, Of course we do, Jesus! Why are you even asking us?

But then, what was Christ so upset about? Why did he occasionally get so exasperated? Why was his final word on the varieties of ignorance that are dealt with in Chapter twelve of Luke, and that starts out with somebody asking him how to deal with a family inheritance, why was his response to say: "Don't you get it? I haven't come to show you how to settle human affairs in human terms! I have come to rescue all of humanity from that hopeless pursuit!"

I think the answer is that Christ wasn't just looking for belief, whatever exactly that is. He wasn't just looking for people who could give the correct answer to a question. (Do you believe in God? Sure do! Great, you get an A). Christ was looking for lives lived in ever increasing conformity to belief in the reality of God.

Allow me to expand on that. What Christ accomplished through His resurrection and ascension was to prove the reality of the Kingdom of God, of the spiritual world where God reigns. What Christ came to teach was how, in this material world, to live lives that grasp and acknowledge what that spiritual reality means for us..

What exasperated Christ was not the inability to give correct answers to questions like good little schoolchildren. What exasperated Him was the failure to exhibit in one's life the full and conforming appreciation of the reality those answers represent.

Let me give you an analogy, though it's far from a perfect analogy. Suppose you woke up one morning and discovered that somehow, miraculously, you had the power to change one, but only one, thing about every person you know or meet. You can make them taller or shorter or richer or smarter or poorer or more generous of less angry....anything at all. All you have to do is will it to make it so.

And suppose you had absolute proof that you have this power. Maybe you tried it out on a few friends, made them taller or smarter or gave them warts or...whatever. The point is, you have total conviction that you have this power.

Now think about it. Wouldn't that significantly change the nature of every single human relationship in your life? Knowing you had this power and this responsibility, wouldn't you reexamine with a totally different perspective the characters and lives of your friends and family? Wouldn't it change dramatically the kind of interest and attention you bring to every new acquaintance?

And that I think indicates the source of Christ's exasperation. The belief in God is not like the belief that Barack Obama is the President or that men have walked on the moon. If we truly believe that an infinitely knowing, infinitely concerned Being exists, and that that Being loves each of us the way a parent loves her child and yet also, because of that very love, requires that we conform our lives to God's nature, on penalty of discipline, then surely that belief would color every action of our lives, that every single thing we do, think, feel and say would be informed by that belief.

When Christ warns against fixating one's life on material wealth, he wasn't talking about money as opposed to other material rewards. Remember that he tells us elsewhere that unless you can hate your own father and mother, you are not prepared to follow Him.

As Christ says, with exasperation, to the man in the crowd near the beginning of Chapter Twelve, he didn't come to adjudicate issues in the material world; he came to open the door for all humanity to an entirely new world, one utterly unlike in many respects the world with which we are all familiar. He came to open the door to that world, and to serve as our guide and teacher as we take our first faltering steps into it.

At the beginning of the chapter, before launching into his series of illustrations and examples, Christ is quite explicit about the source of His frustration:

*"I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, you are all of more value than many sparrows.(vv 4-7)*

This remark about the hairs of your head being numbered is sometimes explained as showing God's loving concern for us, but I don't think so, not in this context, where Christ has just told us whom to fear.

His point **here** is not that God loves us - although obviously He does make that point in many other places. His point here is that God is watching us, always. That God knows everything about us, what we are doing, thinking and saying. There is nothing about us of which God is not aware, down to the number of hairs on our heads.

Christ's frustration does not stem from out failure to acknowledge God's existence. As James points out, even the demons know that...and tremble.(James 2:19). Christ is frustrated when - if I may say this with reverence - knowing God exists, or at least claiming to know it, we don't even tremble.

What is the application of this to us? Well that will vary, of course, from Christian to Christian. Christ doesn't give us sets of specific rules; he gives us a yardstick by which we can measure ourselves. To what extent does the conscious awareness of the reality of God's presence illuminate and influence the various elements of our daily lives? To what degree do we consult with God in making our decisions, whether large or small? How conscientiously do we express our gratitude to, how openly do we confess our failures before, how sharply do we experience our separation from Our Father when we disobey or go astray or harden our hearts against His love. These are things no one can judge for us, but which, as Christians, we must judge for ourselves. This is the beam we must acknowledge in our own eyes.

And so, gracious God, our prayer for this morning is that You open our hearts as well as our minds to Your own reality. Make Your abiding presence known to us in the secret depths of our souls, where words fail and the intellect never reaches. Fill the wellsprings of our wills with the living water of Your Spirit and Your love. And we ask this in Jesus' name.