

17 Pentecost, Proper 21, Yr. A

September 27, 2020

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

There are several themes running through this morning's scriptures – things like understanding the mind of God and, maybe a bit easier, understanding the mind of Christ, and questions of authority – who gets to say what God is like anyway and things like growth and change and our preference for the comfort of the status quo. So, with all that, where to start?

If we look first at the Ezekiel reading we see a number of those themes being played out. Apparently, the idea that the sins of the parents are visited on the children was an old and well-ingrained idea. And even after Ezekiel tells the Israelites in no uncertain terms that that's not the way God works, it's an idea that hangs around. It's still around in the time of Christ – remember when he healed the man who was born blind? And the questions that came to the fore? Who sinned? This man or his parents? So an idea about God – a WRONG idea – but a persistent one. This was apparently a piece of conventional wisdom that is hard to shake, but it's not a truth about the nature of God. I'd like to interject something here about how we think about God. It may have been Mark Twain who said that God made us in God's image and we've been returning the favor ever since, making a God that mirrors us. Because our minds are so small compared to the infinite God, we'll never get the full reality of God. So our understanding of God is always limited – and the consistent danger is that we take the values of the culture we live in and project them on to God. So, when reading the Bible, one thing we become aware of is what's called progressive revelation. In reading the OT, for instance, what we see is a record of a peoples' encounter with God. But their vision and definition of God and what God's about is filtered through their culture and through their limited understanding. For instance in the OT, there are many images of God as warrior and of God as violent because that's the way they understood the world. It's pretty easy to take cultural values and use them to explain God, or even to "decide" what it is that God wants you to do. But as you read through the Bible, you begin to get a different picture of God, so that in the NT, Jesus is talking about a non-violent, loving God. (One caution here, though. And that's that people, especially Christians, are tempted to say that the OT is all about law and there's no love until we get to Jesus and the NT. That's incorrect. You'll remember when Jesus gave a summary of the OT, it was love God, love your neighbor.)

What are we trying to do when we try to define who God is? I'm guessing part of that is a desire to really come to KNOW God, to live as God wants us to live, to please God. But part of that may be less laudable – not about coming to know and love God – but about just being safe and having God in our control. Some scholars talk about the human desire to do that – to kind of put God in a box – OK, defined, understood, that's that. Rather like the fellow on the Ed Sullivan show many years ago now who had a head in a box and he'd open it when he wanted an answer. We'd like that, too, wouldn't we? We'd know right where God was when we wanted him. Humans have tried many ways to accomplish that: scholars point to the Ark of the Covenant, or the temple, or perhaps less obviously, to our theologies and ideologies. I think we can get why we want to do that. But it's never going to work. God is always going to be bigger

than we are and we're never going to be in control. We're always going to have to be willing to learn more, to trust more, to change our hearts and our minds.

We see something similar happening in the Paul reading. These new Christians are surrounded by a Greek and Roman culture in which the idea of a god had to do with a being with human qualities, but squared. So the gods were jealous and arbitrary and greedy – once again, humans writ large. So, in that context, Paul is asking them to change, to think more deeply, to recognize that the God of Jesus was totally different. That, instead of grasping for power (and everything else) THIS God is about emptying himself, about self-giving. The Anglican theologian, John Macquarrie, talks about God in those same terms. God, he says, is about “letting-be” – about enabling, about empowering, about bringing things and persons to life. So, in Genesis, we see this God saying, “Let there Be,” over and over again – let there be light and sun and moon and stars, let there be plants and animals and let there be humans in My image. This God continually creates, continually pours out his grace into creation. Paul is presenting the Philippians with a new revelation, asking them to change their ideas about God and what God's about.

We see the same thing operating in the Matthew reading. A little context is helpful here. The Pharisees are confronting Jesus with a question about his authority. But the question doesn't come out of the blue. This is taking place right after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, being hailed by a great crowd and right after he's taken it upon himself to chase the money lenders out of the temple. So the question is a legitimate one: **BY WHAT AUTHORITY ARE YOU DOING THESE THINGS? AND WHO GAVE YOU THAT AUTHORITY?** In their view, authority needs to come with some credentials, with rabbinic ordination or something similar. They themselves have their authority from the tradition, from their knowledge of Torah, from the system within which they are working. And part of that system is a delicate balance between the Jews and Rome. So they have some legitimate concerns – not only about the hammer of Rome coming down on Israel, but also that Jesus, with this new teaching, may be leading people down the garden path. Because to their way of thinking, that's exactly what he's doing. Jesus wants them to think more deeply so he asks the question about John and where John's authority came from. They're caught, as the text points out, so they go with the expedient answer, **WE DON'T KNOW.**

It's probably not a bad idea to pause here to consider authority in our own time. Who has it and where do they get it? Or, better phrased, who can I trust and how do I know? A person can have authority because of occupying a certain position, or because of education, or perhaps because of a personal integrity. But we also can ascribe authority to people who don't deserve it – perhaps to someone who's charismatic, or has really strong convictions (whether they're legitimate or not) or someone who is articulate and maybe even loud, or even more unfortunately, to someone who's a celebrity because we envy their fame, or to someone who's wealthy because we envy their riches. So it remains a relevant question.

In this case, the Pharisaic tradition had developed a theology and a religious practice and identity that had held the Jewish people together during the exile and during occupation. So Jesus is asking them to change something deeply treasured. He's accusing them of allowing

their theology to blind them to the truth of what John did and what Jesus himself is doing. Those you call sinners are going into the Kingdom ahead of you, he tells them, because even though John was doing God's work, you didn't believe him, and even after you saw his righteousness, his justice, God's loving-kindness working through John and through me, you DIDN'T CHANGE YOUR MINDS AND BELIEVE IT. You let the partial truth of your system blind you to the larger truth of what God is doing.

I don't think this is a problem limited to the Pharisees - it's a human problem. We construct an explanation of God and of life; we have our ideas about how things should work – and changing that is really hard – and the more central those beliefs and ideas are, the harder it is to change them. I remember something Peter Gomes wrote about the fact that he only had so many ideas and he rather liked the ones he had, so he wasn't all that interested in getting rid of them. I think each of us could say the same.

One Bible commentator I read said that he was channel surfing one day and came upon a talk show in which someone was asking Dr. Phil who he would most like to interview. He said that would be Jesus. "I'd really like to sit down and interview Jesus and ask him about the meaning of life," he said. The commentator said he was thinking, "Oh, no, you wouldn't! You'd be crazy to do that. He would turn you upside down and inside out. He would confound all your questions and probably end up telling you to sell everything you own, give the money to the poor and come, follow me."

Thinking about that, I couldn't help but think about St. Francis, whose feast day is this week. When we think about Francis, we usually picture him standing with birds on his shoulders and a couple of wild animals standing peacefully nearby. But his story is much more challenging than that. You may remember that, after being wounded in a war, Francis had a profound conversion experience – changing his life from being a carefree romantic, to something completely different – someone searching for God. He was praying in a dilapidated chapel one day and heard God ask him to "repair God's church." Francis thought he meant that chapel and so he set about doing that. Unfortunately, he used money that he got from selling some of the goods from his father's warehouse, which didn't go over well. It wasn't until he adopted a life of strict poverty and obedience that he came to understand that God was asking him to do so much more – to reform the entire church in Francis' day. So change, new revelations, deeper understanding all leading to self-giving in imitation of Jesus and God.

So, as always, what about us? I think these scriptures call us to look more deeply at God and at Jesus, both through study and through prayer and to be courageous enough to allow God to do as Paul suggests – to allow God to work in us, enabling us to will and to work for God's good pleasure. It may mean letting go of some old ideas and exposing ourselves to some new ones. It may mean letting go of some things that no longer contribute to our transformation into what God is calling us to be. It will surely mean coming to know and love God more and more. That's what we're here for, after all. Amen.

