

Humble believing: Trusting the God who loves us

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Luke 17.1-10

Introduction

One question that faces all human beings personally and institutions that they create is who are we? In marketing people look for what sets them apart so that they can sell products or services. They make an identity for themselves so that they are identifiable. Humans have done this from the beginning. Sometimes we have found identity in family, clan or tribe. Sometimes religion has shaped us. And much to the surprise of Western Europe and Australia such identity making is on the rise with increasing immigration from the Middle East.

In western countries we have turned identity into an individual issue. It is a plastic card that can be stolen. It is very vulnerable. The popularity of Frank Sinatra's 'I did it my way' at funerals marks out the aspiration. We know of course that we are really products of mass marketing and mass production and that doing it my way is but a fond dream.

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments from the Christian point of view is how much it is assumed in the west that Christians will simply knuckle down and quiescently accept Enlightenment values. I read just such an argument in one of the right wing tabloids this week. The enlightenment has cowed Christianity into submission so that it no longer has an identity apart from Enlightenment society and values.

On the other hand Muslim immigrants don't submit. And according to this well-known columnist they must, just like the Christians have.

All this poses a challenge for Christian identity and in a very challenging way. Can we say who we are?

Jerusalem and death are now clearly in Jesus' sights. So the four points he makes in conclusion here bring his view of Christian identity into stark contrast with that of his opponents.

He has a central warning around which the four points gather: "Be on you guard." What do we have to be on our guard about; what do we have to watch so that our true identity won't be destroyed?

Let's turn to the first of the four elements of identity.

Causing little ones to stumble, vv. 1-2

Remember that Jesus has had to defend his meeting with, eating with, and drinking with social undesirables: toll collectors and sinners, their collective name. And to do that he told parables like the lost son and the rich man and Lazarus.

You will beware that your attitudes, behavior, teaching, social structures do not cause little ones to lose their allegiance to Jesus, to abandon their faith, to set up barriers to their hearing the liberating word of Jesus.

Scandals will come; in a world of sin and pain. But they are grave. That gives great grief that raises a cry to heaven for justice and mercy.

Who are the little ones? The blind, the lost, the tame, the social pariah, the prodigal son, Lazarus (as in Lazarus and the rich man).

And offence or scandal here is not about words that we play with in our society but questions of justice, mercy, forgiveness, welcome and hospitality towards those who cannot expect it.

The gruesome sanction in this saying about millstones and drowning is an expression of how deep the offence is. It cuts to the very heart of God. Our playing around with offence in our society palls into superficiality compared to this.

The criminal activity of some church leaders now being brought to light is just this sort of offence. We know how painful it is for us let alone the victims. How deeply wounded is God. It was for this that he went to the cross, so there might be no more victims.

But this offence extends beyond sexual power plays. It cuts to the heart of who we are; God's people, or the Satan's people.

This is our first marker of identity; the little ones and the justice, compassion, mercy and welcome that is due to them because God loves them. We cannot block, discourage or hinder God's call to the little ones to be his disciples.

Prodigious forgiveness, vv. 3-4

Flowing from that is the next marker; prodigious forgiveness.

Why here? Well it is very straightforward. We love revenge. And we love our own sense of moral worth, our own moral high ground. In this passage Jesus confronts severance within the community caused by sin. Sin separates us; that is its nature. It separates us from God too. That is its nature. But it need not be permanent.

Someone who creates severance within the community of this kind must be confronted with the cause. Now that is always difficult; often because revenge and high moral ground take the place of humility and the capacity and will to walk in the others' shoes. Nevertheless confrontation must take place.

Then repentance follows: Repentance and not penance. Repentance is confession, acceptance of fault and the desire to take up God's agenda again among the people of God whatever the personal cost. Repentance is a life changer; penance may be little more than ticking a box.

Then acceptance follows: as God accepts us. We are not judges in these matters. We are merely brothers and sisters trying to live out God's identity for us; compassion, justice, mercy and peace.

The background is Jesus' story of the prodigal son. The father's prodigious forgiveness of a son who took all, wished him dead and destroyed everything is the model.

These two identity markers, the little ones and prodigious forgiveness are hugely difficult and problematic for most of us and hence the cry from the apostles: "Increase our faith."

Prodigious trust in God, vv. 5-6

Indeed. Increase our faith. How much faith do we need to be like the father in story of the prodigal son? How much faith do we need to see God's little ones and defend them from the powerful like the rich man? How much faith do we need to give them the chance to know God's love and experience justice and mercy?

Too much. At least too much for us. Like us the apostles are dismayed, surprised and have a sense of inadequacy in the light of such demands. This goes way beyond the law. It is unmanageable.

It is clear that the cry, "Increase our faith" exposes a serious flaw in the disciples grasp on spiritual reality.

They assume that they have faith but Jesus point out that they do not have faith enough to measure up to the size of the mustard seed. If they had that much they could move the proverbial deep-rooted sycamore tree right out of the ground and into the sea.

The disciples have confused quantity and quality. And quality depends on the nature of God. You don't need more he says. You need to be more like the God who sent me. You need to deepen your relationship, be closer to the character of the One who died on the cross. That is when faith has power not as magic but as change. To watch out for the little ones and offer prodigious forgiveness to brothers and sisters requires a different character; one like the God who looks out for them or who forgives us.

Trust is a quality of relationship. We are not 44 gallon drums to be filled with faith but people who need transformation into the character of God.

And that leads us to our fourth and final point about which we need to beware,

Total lack of concern for status, vv. 7-10

We have been moving towards this little parable of the worthless servant which most moderns love to hate. In the age of self-esteem this is very offensive: "We are worthless slaves." Indeed!

However, like much of Jesus' teaching it forces us to reexamine all of our assumptions.

This is a story about honour, patronage and favour in the ancient world. It is not about politeness in any modern sense; saying thank you to the slave would have placed the master in debt to the slave. Would the master owe the slave special privileges just for doing his duty? Would the slave become the master's patron? No.

Jesus is opposing the mind-set that thinks it can gain honour or reward from God simply by doing something right. Remembering the needs of the little ones, seeking restoration and forgiveness within the community are simply daily routine for disciples. They are not extraordinary or heroic. They can provide no status claims before God or in the community.

God's love for us is gracious. God owes us nothing. We owe God everything.

Perhaps now we can begin to see the foundation for humility. If humility is using whatever power we have for the good of others without expecting anything in return then the parable teaches us the underlying character of God that guides humility. God is grace.

Conclusion

Our identity is locked into that of the God of Jesus. It has nothing to with externals. They merely assist us to do the work of disciples.

This God's identity is one who loves the little ones so much offence to them is deadly, who loves sinners so much he wants them to return again and again and again.

Thus God's identity is such that he is trustworthy beyond all else and our trust has to there, not in what we can do but in what he will do. This is a God who has no love of human status, honour and power but who loves humility that gives itself freely, just as he is humble. This is the God who identifies us—the humble God.