

Message Sunday Aug 27/17

by Pam Gray

This passage in Matthew is very difficult to read. Here, Jesus knows that he is soon going to die at the hands of his enemies. He knows that there will be great suffering. But the disciples do not know this or if they do, they reject it. See how Peter views this time. He rebukes Jesus for even thinking about what is to happen. "God forbid it, Lord!" He is trying to protect Jesus but Jesus sees this statement as a retrograde step.

Peter angers Jesus; Jesus knows that God is leading him to his death and he must surrender his will to God for the events to take place. Peter must not get in the way of God's plan; he must not interfere. This plan to go to Jerusalem is God's divine plan for the end of Jesus' human life. But it is not the end, only the beginning of something so special that no one must deny God's will.

Jesus implores his followers to deny themselves and take up their cross to follow him. What he wants them to understand is that they should not put themselves at the centre of their own lives but follow in Jesus' way, minister to those who need assistance, care for others, spread God's love and not worry about their next meal. God will provide for them if they follow Jesus' path. Indeed, it will take great faith in the power of God's love to carry them on their way in the future.

What is God saying to us, today? I think that God is not asking us to completely deny ourselves. Rather, Jesus is saying that we must put our priorities in order. We can still enjoy this life but we must make room for the priorities that Jesus set for his disciples: doing God's work wherever we live. When we do that, our entire life will reflect the principles in which we truly believe. We will conduct ourselves, thinking of others first and ourselves second.

Both Jesus and Moses came to the realization that if we are going to live as God wants, then living may not always be easy. We must make difficult choices. We must give up some opportunities and forgo some luxuries. In Romans, Paul says not to let evil overcome us; conversely, do not be overcome by evil. We must not allow the evil in the

world to stop us from following Jesus' way. We must not become despondent, thinking that there is so much bad news around the globe that we cannot make a difference. And we must not think that it is our job alone, not anyone else's, to help others. We do not act alone. We are Christians, part of a world-wide communion of others who can effect change if we band together to fight the evil in this world. We must confront evil in all its forms together if we are to be successful in living a Christian life. That is why we come to church each Sunday, to be re-energized and renewed in our faith so that we can go out and face the world each day.

I want to tell you a story written by Ralph Milton. His wife was a United Church clergyperson and his best friend was James Taylor, writer of "Everyday Psalms". Ralph has written many books but this little story comes from "Sermon Seasonings" written in 1997.

Ralph wrote this story about "evil" or Adam and Eve. It has a new twist on the old theme.

Eve got herself and Adam chucked out of Eden for those questions, but would it really have been better if they'd stayed there? Did God want them to stay there?

Eden is, after all, the garden of childhood. When children don't grow, either mentally or physically, we rush them off to a specialist. God would have considered creation flawed if these creatures, created in the divine image, had not grown.

I'm not the first parent who has found the conversation of a two-year-old delightful but somewhat limited. Most of the delight in two-year-old conversations is sharing the discoveries they are making. And the main question the two-year-old asks is, "Why?" That question implies the beginning of doubts, doubts which come to full flower when the kid hits teenage.

I think God was secretly delighted when Eve picked the fruit and found the knowledge of good and evil. Eve showed a bit of gumption. Eve asked hard questions and discovered the difference between what is good and what is bad, and in the process grew one huge step towards being even more like the God in whose image she was created. God, I think, planted those holy questions in human makeup. Why? Why not?

Of all God's creatures, we are the only ones with the capacity to doubt. Of all God's creatures, we are the only ones with the capacity for faith.

So let's hear it for Eve. Without her, we'd still be overgrown kids in a spiritual kindergarten.

Ralph showed that God wanted us to discover that there was a difference between good and evil. If we continually thought that everything in the world was good, we would not have any incentive to make things better. We would not work hard to improve the lot of people who are ill, without shelter or food, subject to abuse or violence or any other ill we notice. It is only this ability to perceive what is wrong in the world that assists us to act. Animals do not have this discernment. They cannot figure out right from wrong.

God wanted us to have these abilities so that we would rely on God to strengthen us for the tasks ahead of us. To have the courage to face tough decisions every day. I want to read you an old poem by George Herbert to illustrate what I mean.

THE PULLEY

By George Herbert

When God at first made man.
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can.
Let the world's riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span."

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

"For if I should," said he,
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

"Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast."

George Herbert knew that if humans became comfortable in this life, we would all become lazy, not wanting to change anything. God knew that we had to learn the difference between good and evil and not be content with that knowledge. Taking away rest and contentment was key to creating our real nature, giving us the incentive to improve many things in this life. Or else we would all still be living in the Stone Age, hunting for animals by spear and roasting meat on an open fire.

Today we live in difficult times. Nations roar at other nations, playing dangerous war games. People all over the world live in poverty, illnesses abound, mental distress is everywhere and yet we are still able to pray for the betterment of others by petitioning God, who empowers and changes in miraculous ways. God listens to our prayers and answers us.

Matthew says that we must not hoard the things of this life, believing that if we are surrounded with wealth, we will be protected from the ills of this world. We must live without a lot of care about money and put others at the forefront of our being. Only then, can we find true rest and fulfillment in doing what Jesus would have us do. Amen.