

Facing The Truth -- Growing Through Forgiveness

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Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

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It's appropriate for me, preaching in Elmira for the first time, to begin with a quote from Mark Twain:

"It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

Episcopalians don't have a reputation for preaching, or listening to "hellfire and brimstone" sermons. Over many decades we've developed a tendency for dignified, polite (and often obscure) discourse. We leave the scary stuff to our sisters and brothers of other connections.

But the prophets -- and especially Jesus -- don't always choose that road. Often what they say is profoundly disturbing. This is true of this morning's reading from Isaiah, and especially this morning's Gospel. In one, we hear of God's intention to allow the destruction of his "vineyard" (a symbol of the people of Israel) because of the unresponsiveness of its citizens. "(God) expected justice, but found bloodshed; integrity, but only a cry of distress."

And there is no relief at all from stark reality in Jesus' words: "Do you suppose I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." And he goes on to describe all the members of a single family turned against each other. The Gospel passage continues with a scathing condemnation of our blindness, and ends with a warning that we must waste no time in getting our thoughts, actions and intentions in order. The task is not to be left for "later" or "when we know enough to do it right."

These are certainly *not* "parts of the Bible we can't understand." They may well be parts of the Bible we'd sooner ignore. The Bible I use has 2,045 pages -- there's lots of familiar and predictable comfort, forgiveness and victory in there; why don't we just skip the hard stuff? Very simply -- because the "hard stuff" describes where we mostly are now, what God has come to save us from.

A good deal of what we read in the Bible sounds frighteningly "up to date." Every day in the news we hear elected leaders saying to each group they're speaking to what *that* group wants to hear; a few days later the same person is saying quite different things to another group. The idea of *integrity*, of adopting a position and sticking with it, simply doesn't "sell" very well. The Biblical ideal (as outlined in Micah 6:8 and elsewhere -- doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God) is forever being re-interpreted, re-defined to satisfy each audience, each situation. Recently we have heard a good many members of Congress supporting cuts in food stamps funding -- with the national unemployment rate at near-record levels. It's small wonder that God threatens to abandon the vineyard.

We claim to want to live the life of the Kingdom of Heaven. That Kingdom, that life, is a *new Creation*; it's something entirely different from who and what we have been, from who and

what we are now. We need to be aware of where we're starting from if we're going to receive, enter into, and enjoy the way of life to which we're being led. If we don't understand, deeply and in detail, who and where we are now, we have no way to appreciate what God is offering us.

We also cannot comprehend what **we** need to do to make this New Life happen. It's not something which somehow is **done** to us, but it's something into which we change and grow, guided by God's loving hands, guided by our membership in the Church (the ever-growing, ever-changing Body of Christ), and made possible by the strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

One of the most important words in the New Testament is "forgiveness." It's also one of the toughest concepts for us to embrace, because most of us are (at best) only occasionally good at it. Truly forgiving a person or a group of people for something they've done which has hurt us is very hard. It takes a lot more than even the most heart-felt "That's OK." or "Think nothing of it."

True forgiveness means moving ahead as if the action or thought by which we've been hurt **never happened**; this can be almost impossibly challenging to do, as I'm sure all of us find regularly in our daily lives. We remember the offense, we may still feel what it felt like at the time. Sometimes, and perversely, we may even cherish it. But God intends that we move on **free** -- no longer bound or controlled by it, **free** of that memory and those feelings.

Forgiveness has often been called "God's greatest gift." It's a gift which God offers to every single one of us, every moment of our lives. Why? Not because we somehow **deserve** it, not because we've **earned** it -- but because of who God is and what God wants for each of us. It's God's endless, infinite desire to offer us forgiveness which makes it possible for us to look honestly and fully at the evil we think and do, the forgetful wickedness of our lives, and our countless strays from the path God intends for us -- and move on past them all.

Accepting God's forgiveness, and trusting God's intentions for us as a New People, can help us understand and deal with those times of fear, conflict, back-sliding and frustration which happen in our lives every day -- even when they're described in such vivid Biblical detail, even when they seem so far beyond our ability to manage. God's forgiveness enables us to join with the small child who gratefully prayed: "God, I'm not as good as I wanna to be. And I'm not as good as I'm gonna be. But thanks to you, I'm not what I was."

That's a start.

Amen.

The Rev. C. L. Mowers