

Bait and Switch

Psalm 103:8-16; Hebrews 10:26-39

I suppose the first decision a person makes when hearing a passage like the one I've just read is, "Am I going to listen to this?" Because we have become people who want to check out of anything hard. If it doesn't seem useful at first glance, if the Bible doesn't address a concern I actually feel when I hear it, lots of people just check out and hope for something more to their taste, next time out, next place they land.

Last week, I told you about my being sixteen years old in the 1970's and giving my life to Christ. Which I wouldn't have done if I wasn't desperately unhappy in the first place. On the outside, I was a track star, a fast talking, funny, rock and roll hipster, but on the inside it was a different story. I was lonely even in a sea of laughing friends. I was desperately unhappy at home, indifferent at school, unable to find love or to give love.

So a Sunday School teacher gave me a paperback New Testament, and a guy on my track team told me that God was real and that I ought to do something about it. And so, that year, I walked the sawdust trail. Ended up at an ice cream counter, praying the prayer in the back of some tract my friend read to me. Now, there was a small group of kids at my school who had landed on the same page of the same tract I had read. And they told me I needed to read the Bible so I made the tactical mistake of trying to read the whole thing that year. In for a penny, in for a pound.

To be honest, I read a lot of disturbing, mystifying things that year in my Bible, but as I told you last week, I landed on a prayer of David's from Psalm 103. *"The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love, He will not always strive with us, nor will he keep his anger forever. He has not rewarded us for our sins, nor requited us for our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him..."*

I used to read David's prayer way up in the back stairwell of my high school, and I'd say to myself, "I may never sort life out but God will forgive me, God will forgive me, God will forgive me." And just getting that notion into my heart went a long way toward sorting life out. We read in Hebrews last week that Christ is the Sacrifice, he satisfied God's justice so we could deal with a Father and not a Judge. Christ is the Priest in God's house. Jesus is the man who humanized God, brought God into reach so we could love and know him in a give and take, day in, day out relationship.

And strangest of all, we read last week that Christ is the Sanctuary, he is the Cornerstone of a human sanctuary, he is the head of a body that we are all woven into when we give our lives to him. Which sounds strange but what it means is that Christ lives where his people gather to worship and serve him as Church. Now when I say Church, I don't mean this or any other any

particular building. I don't think Church exists on the radio or the internet or in any private gathering of people.

Church is not a place or a particular group of people who take it on themselves to presume that they are God's own. Church only happens, we get built into the God's sanctuary, we get woven into Christ's body only when we covenant together before God and Christ to live in that constellation of relationships God provides in Church for each and every soul who gives his life to Christ. Individually, we are all kinds of people from everywhere, differently brilliant, differently needy, each of us like God in different ways, each of us sinful and broken in different ways.

But for all that difference, the New Testament teaches that Christ sees us and deals with us as one. Christ sees us together in Church as his one Beloved, his bride, his temple, his family, his body. He deals with us as one, loves us as one, forgives us as one, will welcome us home on the Last Day as one. The point being that we know Christ together, or we don't know him at all. We together are his sanctuary, his body, his bride, his family when we worship and serve and handle his gospel together in the healing, cleansing, redemptive relationships God has taught us to keep in Church.

Now I remind you of all this, I repeat myself a lot I know, because this morning we are confronted with one of those disturbing, mystifying passages that can only make sense if we hold onto what we already know Christ has done for us. He is the Sacrifice who perfectly satisfied God's justice against us. He is that human Priest who we can know and love, who can guide and encourage us into the presence of the Almighty. And when we live together as Church, Christ becomes that Sanctuary, the haven where together we learn a way of life that is pure and beautiful and holy.

Hold on to that! Because this morning Hebrews warns us that, *"...if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, rather a fearful expectation of judgment...a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries..."*. Our author reminds us that in Old Israel, under Moses' law, the penalty for openly, finally, blowing off the commandments of God was death. Oh, there was due process, God made allowances for human error and deceit, but the stakes were high. Shake your fist at God in Old Israel and you were supposed to die.

Our passage goes on, *"How much worse punishment, do you think, will he deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God...who has profaned the blood of the covenant...who has insulted the Spirit of grace?"* Try that question out on a 16 year old, who wants to follow Christ but last weekend was out on the railroad tracks drinking with his friends, all tangled up in habits and relationships that were bent and broken and going wrong. This is the sort of passage that can drive you right up the back stairwell of your high school, digging for in your Bible for promises about grace.

So before we think about what our passage does mean, we should take some time to work through what it does not mean. It does not mean that, when you give your life to Christ, there is some finite number of chances you get to put sin right. It does not mean that there is some level of offense, some frequency of stumbles after which the Sacrifice Christ made for us doesn't apply. I know that because there are too many Bible passages that teach exactly the opposite of that notion.

1 John 1! *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness...Little children, I write this to you that you may not sin. But, if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father [a Priest!] Jesus Christ the righteous and he himself is the propitiation [the Sacrifice] for our sins and not for our sins only but also for those of the entire world."*

Christ is not some fickle, faithless priest who will get his feelings hurt and give up on us. His sacrifice has enough potency to atone for a whole world of sin, which matters because there are some sins you don't untangle from first try! Substance addiction, compulsive behaviors, toxic relationships, deep seated bitterness often require years of learning and changing before we're entirely free and the gospel promises that Christ will be there with the forgiveness and guidance we need *"to the end of the age."*

So I think it's safe to say that trampling the Son of God, profaning the blood of the covenant, insulting the Spirit of grace is not a matter of stepping wrong one too many times, it is not a matter of being so bad that the sacrifice Christ offered just can't keep up. Christ did forgive me back in the day for being 16 and mostly a train wreck. And he has forgiven me through the years for a world of sin and folly. And he is still there for me today although I'm not the man I should be after 45 years of Jesus and gospel and church.

It follows that none of us will go to hell because Jesus gave up on us. Passage after passage teaches that he just doesn't do that. Jesus said, *"All that the Father gives to me shall come to me. And the one who comes to me I shall never, ever cast out."* Christ doesn't give up on us. But we trample the Son of God, we profane the blood he shed, we insult or blaspheme the Spirit when we give up on him and on each other.

When some twist or turn of life convinces us that the Sacrifice doesn't apply to us, or to someone else. We either despair of ourselves or we don't let someone else up for air. When we stop engaging with Christ as that Priest, that personal guide who can teach us to be at home with God and each other. When we give up on Church, when some flaw or sin or problem we encounter convinces us that God's people together aren't the sanctuary where Christ lives to heal and change and help and guide.

When we stop believing that forgiveness is possible for us and those who hurt us, when we don't believe that Christ is near and good and we stop praying and seeking and knocking, when we

stop engaging with God's people in church, stop handling the gospel together and only engage with those people and that gospel which suit our fancy, then we reveal that our lives were never founded on the Sacrifice, and the Priesthood and the Sanctuary Christ offered us .

So our author challenges his readers to "*Remember the early days...*". It is a function of human nature to embrace a noble cause heart and soul without necessarily calculating for the difficulty and complexity of completing the course. "*You have need of endurance...*" the author of Hebrews tells us. And then he cites an obscure passage from the prophet, Habakkuk: "*...the Coming One will come and not delay.*" In other words, Judgment Day is coming and no one is going to postpone it.

"*But,*" the prophet goes on, "*my righteous one will live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.*" Those words, "*my righteous one will live by faith*" became the key which 500 years ago changed Martin Luther from a morbid, compulsive, medieval monk into that teacher and leader whose outlook ushered on the modern world with all its freedom and progress. My righteous one shall live by faith.

What it means is that the kid in the stairwell doesn't have to sort out life to be known and loved and forgiven by God. All we have to do is read the promise and believe. Stake our lives on the fact that Christ's sacrifice will make us clean, Christ's presence as priest will teach and guide us, Christ's sanctuary, his people, is the place where we can belong, healed and whole and one. Believe those things, live by that gospel, and no sin or failure will undo what Christ is and what he did for us. My righteous one shall live by faith.