

March 21, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

Give us that old time religion. Give us, sweet Jesus, the "blessed be's...." a.k.a. the Beatitudes - all those lovely blessings...

- ♦ Blessed are the poor in spirit
- ♦ Blessed are those who mourn

Sure, we'd rather a God who showers with blessings, who is the pleasant, divine butler. God, the useful cosmic counselor. A God, good and kind enough to approve of you.

Thank you, Jesus. Sweet Jesus. Easter Jesus. Chocolate Jesus. Give me that resurrection! New life bursting and happy! Sunlight and promises.

Which explains why we have all those fun and frolicking Easter traditions. Ah, spring! Lo, the winter is past!

Time for flowers, lilies, daffodils blooming
Time for chocolate and treats, especially after the ordeal of winter scarcity.
Time for new clothes, posh frocks, representing those early Christians who would receive new white clothes upon their Easter baptism
Time to celebrate the Easter Hare, which is a celebration of fertility, new life
Time for Easter Eggs, from the Egyptians on a symbol of life and immortality. We all come as an egg one way or another.

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Yet we can forget: to get to Easter, we have crucifixion first. To get the egg, we break the shell.

Resurrection doesn't save, the cross saves.

Resurrection is the promise, the result of our former life dying on the cross. For only in death is there chance for life. All life is purchase by the death of something.

A God, kind and good enough to approve of you?

Well, God doesn't approve of you. That's why he came. And is murdered.

*"Some men are born to do our unpleasant jobs for us."*  
-- To Kill a Mockingbird

Jesus doesn't go to the cross because you deserve him. He goes because he loves God.

You don't deserve Christ, nor his love so unlimited it needs no rationing.

Who here deserves the love of their children, their spouse, their parents?

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Seldom is appreciated an angry Jesus.

Seldom appreciated are Jesus' "cursed are you." They're in the back of Matthew's Gospel, nearer the crucifixion. And these 'curses' are just as relevant as the more welcome 'beatitudes.'

This is the voice of the same tough Jesus who warned, "Repent or perish." It is not God who needs to adjust to us?

Moreover, avoid mistaking your happiness or troubles as a barometer of God's moods. God is the constant, we the erratic. God always is near, always present. It is we who stray.

We listen to the self-same Jesus who speaks about the harsh realities of being faithful.

What's it to be, dear disciple, dear minister? Lapdog? Shill? Butler? Servant of the congregation, tame and domesticated? Servant of whichever institution where you ply your trade?

Or servant of God?

For God to be light, God must also be fire. God burns.

We come needing to be cleansed by fire.

There's a grandma saying:

Every sinner has a future; every saint has a past

Listen:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat;

[He's the Glen Beck, the Rachel Maddow of Jerusalem. Jesus is taking on publicly the power-brokers, the old-guard, the stuffed shirts, holding them up to public scrutiny, even scolding them to their faces for forgetting what the prophets said about religion; for the prophets lamented how the people equated faithfulness with ceremony and ritual, performance and show; the prophets cried out for an old time authentic religion of merit and weight, of a morality proved by their passion for social justice, for economic justice]

therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.

[The prayer shawls, aprons, and, in Hebrew, the tefillin, little boxes tightened around the arm and forehead as a prayer device - the Jewish version of a rosary - very useful for devotionals, but these boys use them to show off their religion, playing to the audience, playing to see who notices, who applauds]

They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi.

[Show offs...looking over their shoulder to see whose looking at them...aren't I something...yes, of course, my name can be found in Who's Who... I had to pay for it...appeals to my vanity]

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your

father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

[Hypocrites: from the Greek word used for stage-actors. Greek actors wore masks when they would change characters in a performance. Hence, a hypocrite is a pretender, a counterfeit, an impersonator]

For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

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There are times not to preach a 'nice-nice' God. God has little room for the self-sufficient and less patience with the self-satisfied.

As any parent knows, there is a time and place for our compassion to scold, threaten, stir up a little wrath, those healthy scares that finally make us vulnerable.

Yes, indeed, we prefer the pleasant God. Ought we also "tremble when we remember God also is just?"

It wasn't sympathizing with Bob Cratchit that transformed Ebenezer Scrooge - it was encountering the dark, forbidding spirit of Christmas future and Scrooge kneeling in terror before his un-mourned tombstone.

It wasn't being persuaded by reasoned debate and skilled forensics that transformed Captain John Newton, slave ship captain -- him eventually (after many false starts), repenting of his complicity in this abomination of human trafficking -- it was him in a terrible storm fearing being drowned, him later near death sick with fever, him finally suffering a stroke. Only then did he repent and write the words to the hymn "Amazing Grace." He knew full well what a wretch, what an infidel he was, and that we are too.

Aren't they wretches, Madge? Tsk, tsk, Madge and Church Lady judge and condemn over a sip of tea. Did you hear the latest about Governor Sanford? Did you hear about Jon Edwards? Or Tiger, or John Ensign, or Congressman Massa.

Name the hypocrite of the week. Giggle, giggle, tsk, tsk. shame, shame.

Well, if we get to judge others and scoff at their sins, then equally fair is when there are some others out there watching you and scoffing at your sins.

So easy to point the finger of judgment at those in the news.

You might remember another grandma saying that when you point a finger at someone else, three fingers point back at yourself. Would you pass muster if your life was fully disclosed? Which memory would you like erased?

But it can't be erased, like words on a chalkboard. They've been scratched into the slate. These indelible memories can only be redeemed.

If we have the audacity to count our blessings, let us also have the guts to count our sins. For Jesus isn't just talking about them Pharisees and scribes, now is he?

For what matters is being able to hold our heads up in town. Being able to look at ourselves in the mirror without shame. Being able to do the unpleasant jobs that are required so we can have the legitimacy to tell our children what is right.

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There are times to avoid preaching a 'nice-nice' God. There are times to scold, hit over the head, threaten - those healthy scares. How tenuous is salvation.

How often we impersonate Christianity.

Jonathan Edwards, colonial preacher and America's greatest theologian, ever reminded his congregation: "Even man's good behavior never breaks out of the circle of self-interest."

So busy trying to curry favor. So worried about the opinions of others.

We fail to measure up, the plumb-line ever true. It exposes how morally and spiritually crooked we are - individually and as a society -- how far bent we are from standing upright with God. It is God's opinion that alone matters, that we may form our opinion about ourselves.

In which direction is your heart pointing? Do you need to make a U-Turn?

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Contrary to those who hold to an "optimistic anthropology" - that is, those who suggest that if we would just be enlightened enough, religious enough, mannerly enough, we would be such splendid fellows and gals -- the reality is (proved rather convincingly by the stubborn facts of human history) we fail and fall far short.

Do we really think we can will ourselves better?

How can we when our "will is determined by the stronger motive?"<sup>1</sup> The self is strong.

It is by our affections that we sense and interpret the world, and respond to the world. We are pulled and drawn, like a compass needle pulled toward the stronger magnet.

But only one pulls us beyond our "circle of self-interest."

Can we will ourselves better?

Think again. It requires our wills broken down and needy. It requires not us being kind and good enough for us to choose God (isn't that nice of us).

What is our only hope is our surrender, our abject helplessness, our poverty, our honesty.

What alone is freeing is our desperate trust not that we choose God but that we have been chosen by God, thus forgiven, redeemed.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards