

By Word and Action

June 1, 2008
Edwards (Knox) United Church
Third Sunday After Pentecost

Genesis 6:9-22 and 7:24 and 8:14-19 (*The links below will open the entire passage from 6:9 to 8:19*)
Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Psalms 46
Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Romans 1:16-17 and 3:22b-28 or also 3:29-31 (*The links below will open the entire passage from 1:16 to 3:31*)
Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Matthew 7:21-29
Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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Our texts look at the relationship of God and creation. They deal with two issues: God's activity of giving paradise, that all things ultimately depend on God and that God's aim, intentions, for creation is good and protective. And then there is our response and how our actions reflect what we believe.

Yet, as we listened, we may have had a sense of discomfort. We have, in the Psalm, advice to take a deep breath and not to react to the troubles of life out of fear and panic. It calls us to trust the divine presence. And that appears to be in tension with the Noah story and the phrase in Matthew - "I never knew you."

I hope you had in your memory the whole story of Noah. For the story teller uses the myth of a flood to deal with the issue of destruction as a solution to evil. One myth that has been passed down through history is that when things get bad, so corrupt, that the only solution is to begin again. In the story God is dismayed with how paradise has been destroyed, and regrets even creating humans. Thus there is a tension even within God. And the story has God resolving to destroy everything, to use violence to solve the problem.

However, there is a shift in understanding. God changes, is in the a becoming process and learns that violence, retribution, retaliation and revenge will never solve anything. And God says:

I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

God changes and learns. God resolves to deal with this broken reality by making a covenant of hope, of affirmation, of persuasion as the power of change. God choose to deal with creation in transformational ways rather through destruction.

The story creates a different understanding of the character of God which gets repeated over and over. If we think that on our own transformation will come, we will be disappointed. The initiative towards

transformation begins in God who is the source of transformation, compassion and persuasion as real power. God takes the constructive role in transformation of our reality. In Romans, which we did not read, Paul reminds the reader that God is in the construction business and one route of that is in Jesus as the Christ.

Jesus embodies in his teaching, his life, death and resurrection, the way God chooses to deal with creation. This is the power of creativity - creative and transforming love and not violence and revenge.

Paul suggests we are justified by trust - faith- which means living faithfully. Living faithfully is to trust the covenant of love as the way to live and deal with the issues of life. Our trust in God calls us to exhibit in our relationships love as persuasion. This means an attitude of honoring those who are different, listening to the inner needs of the other, and to engage one another with strength built on love. This is not a matter of mere tolerance but tolerance built on the value of inclusion and working for the common good. This attitude of working for the common good is to find within ourselves and within others those values that heal and transform. In such a process the other and we are changed, moving all toward transformation.

Matthew reminds us that you cannot serve two masters. On a surface reading it could be taken punitive. That is not what Matthew intends. He is creating a model of ethical reflection - Jesus is the moral teacher we are called to follow.

Jesus had said, in effect:

think of how I have described the way God works in this life and what that implies
for how we treat one another and God.

We are reminded that words and actions go together, and when our actions are those of negativity and punitiveness than we are disconnected from what we say we believe is important for living. Doing and acting are one act. Putting the teachings into practice begins in respecting the aim of God which calls us to respect creation and all that is within it. When we are disconnected from the common good, then our living is one issuing in destruction for all.

Our texts remind us once again that there is an interactive action that grounds reality. We have some self determinative power. That power can be used for good and evil. The issue is how to school that power into the power of transformation.

The other aspect of the interaction is that within reality God offers an aim of creative love which we can incarnate. What we accomplish is taken into God's experience and responds with new possibilities, and this is an ongoing process. Each of our achievements becomes a resource for God for further transformation.

The issue of putting teachings into practice is one we continue to explore and debate. We know that many of our profound problems are caused by our disconnecting values from action. And one of the debates is the nature of what values ought to guide our actions.

We have a right to protect those ideas and values that are important to the well being. However, in an age of fear and chaos we are tempted by views that justify violence and retaliation. Thus, when we use the values of control and violence the end is to create a society that justifies violence even in the case of those things we value. We have seen this in how we have sent Canadians of Arab backgrounds to other countries, not giving them the protection of our values because of fear. In the end we are all made less.

Over against the idea of violence as redemptive we have the long history of the idea within the Bible that the character of God is one of compassion. God is in dynamic relationship with creation. God is

intimately involved in the becoming of the world. And that intimacy is one of persuasive power. God's aim is restoration so we are called to begin in this character of God. Our values are to be in harmony with the aim of God for transformation. The good news is the aim of God is continuously being incarnated in our experience. Over our history we have responded and when we respond positively all of our experience is expanded.

I think we can all find illustrations of this in our own living, and when we look at the history of our world we can see it. My brother was a youth probation officer. Over against the fear based view of youth crime that we see today, he began in the attitude of transformation. The result was that his attitude was successful; some of those he worked with became probation officers. Of course there were failures but that did not discredit the view of rehabilitation as the goal of the justice system.

Our son Jeremy is a crown prosecutor and one of the important values that direct his work is that win or lose are not values. The goal that grounds his view of the justice system is to see that justice happens. It begins in the presumption of innocent until proven guilty. Again that is a value to hold as a corrective to society's fear based attitudes which lead to vengeance and retaliation.

Our texts call us to trust God. Our identity is to be formed around the assurance of God's presence and guidance we find in the Psalm. This has an implication for what we do in the church. It calls us to demand more of one another, to make our baptismal vows more than cultural lip service but an invitation towards forming our identity around what we claim to believe by how we live in the world. We are called to trust the divine power that was manifested in Jesus teaching, life, death, and resurrection.

There are two forms of community organization: one is based on self-protection against threat, which is motivated by fear, the other is based on trust in God's transforming power. Trust in this divine power creates a different community. The new community stands against organized forms of violence, injustice and oppression. It stands for peace, reconciliation, and treating others with respect. In the face of potential harm in our world the job of the church is so to form our identity so we trust the presences and guidance of God as the path to true peace and life. We are in the process of becoming those who witness to the alternative vision of reality, those who are touched by the persuasive power of God. Having that experience we seek now to live it by word and action.

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