

SERMON: Attitude Matters

TEXT: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Well, my nephew graduated from Marine Officer Candidates School yesterday after – in my sister’s words – “a grueling ten weeks.” I certainly don’t doubt her assessment of the process, though I know very little about it. I did, however, have my doubts about my nephew’s decision. Not that I thought he wasn’t up to the task, but I was most concerned that he wouldn’t be able to keep his mouth shut! He’s what I call a “scary smart” person. And like Sheldon’s mother said to him on the Big Bang Theory, “There’s nothing wrong with being smarter than everyone else. You just can’t go around pointing it out!”

You have to have the right attitude going into the military. You have to be humble and teachable and – I imagine – ready to be yelled at. You have to be “all in” or you’re not going to make it. And nobody’s going to be gentle with you.

Most of us, when choosing our favorite Bible verses, are going to choose those that express the gentleness and comfort of God. Today’s passage from Isaiah doesn’t fit that description in any way.

We're not used to hearing such harsh words from Isaiah. What happened to "Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God"? Where's the poetry like we heard in "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint"? Where are the uplifting words proclaiming, "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid"? But here, Isaiah addresses the people of Jerusalem in a biting and derisive way, calling them "rulers of Sodom" and "people of Gomorrah." And if that isn't enough, then he goes on a tirade, rejecting their worship and their offerings. "**I have had enough** of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; **I do not delight** in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.... Trample my courts **no more**; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an **abomination** to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation – **I cannot endure** solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals **my soul hates**; they have become a **burden** to me, **I am weary** of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, **I will not listen**; your hands are full of blood."

After I get over the shock of Isaiah's harshness (or actually God's harshness spoken by Isaiah), it makes me wonder whether God has ever "had enough" of us. What do we, as individuals or as a community of faith, participate in that God "cannot endure"? And what on earth could we do that would cause the God of love to say "my soul hates" what you're doing? While we might be guilty of sins of omission, little white lies, and good intentions never carried out, certainly we don't have "hands full of blood" as Isaiah accuses the Israelites – do we? Are we ever so evil that God would stop listening to our prayers?

Imagine you're scheduled to go to a party or some other event, but – for whatever reason – you don't really want to go. But you're obligated. So, you buy a token gift – something cheap that looks expensive – and you drag yourself to the party. You act like you're having a good time while you're there, but you stay only as long as necessary; long enough to put in an appearance so everyone will know you've been there. And then you sneak out as soon as you can find an opening.

Part of the problem that Isaiah is trying to communicate to the people of Israel is that they are coming to worship with this kind of half-hearted

attitude. They don't really want to be there, but they do it out of habit and obligation. Their worship is merely to keep up appearances and their hearts are not sincere. They are not "all in."

Like the guy that goes to church every time he visits Las Vegas. His sinning is well-planned. So, he makes time for confession, as well, though he has no intention to change his behavior.

Obviously, this is not the attitude God is looking for. And the kinds of prayers this man might say on Sunday may well be the kind that God becomes weary of hearing.

We sometimes act as though we know all there is to know, and we have nothing else to learn. But we come to church to have our beliefs confirmed and to collect scriptural ammunition for judging others. And if we begin to feel like the judgment is against us, then we must be at the wrong church, or the church leadership is taking us in the wrong direction. We know what God wants from us, and we come to church to be assured that God loves us and knows what we want and is on our side. There's a t-shirt slogan that says, "Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be

happy.” This is just for fun, of course, but it does point to a popular belief that *God wants us to be happy*.

“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean,” Isaiah continues.

“Remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” This is how our worship continues out in the world.

One of my favorite authors is Anne Lamott. She’s a Presbyterian, but she’s rather controversial for her unorthodox lifestyle and un-pious language. But she writes passionately about her faith, she addresses honestly and humorously about what a struggle it is to live her faith. As the mother of a thirteen-year-old, she thinks about the story of Jesus in the Temple when he was twelve. “He says things so profound that the elders are amazed.... But at the same time he’s blowing the elders away,” she writes, “how is Jesus treating his parents? I’ll tell you: He’s making them crazy. He’s ditched them. They can’t find him for three days. Some of you know what it’s like to not find your kid for three hours. You die. Mary and Joseph have looked everywhere, in the market, at the video arcade. Finally, they find him, in the last place they thought to look – the Temple. And

immediately, he mouths off: Oh, sorry, sorry. I was busy doing all this other stuff, my father's work. Like, Joseph, you're not my real father – you're not the boss of me. I don't even have to listen to you.”

I think the point Lamott is trying to make is that, while Jesus may have been rebellious in the eyes of his parents, he was fully committed to doing God's work. And this illustrates her own struggle to live a life that is congruent with her faith – to “walk the talk”, as the saying goes. And that's what God, through Isaiah, is asking of us. In short, “Don't come in here and pretend to worship me – first, unless you really mean it, and second, unless you're really trying to live it out there.

That's what the Israelites are lacking. And that's what God is looking for from us. Does your life “out there” mesh with what you proclaim “in here”?

Every day there are more and more people leaving churches, claiming to be “spiritual, but not religious.” They believe in God – they even believe in worshipping God – but they don't believe in the church. Sometimes I get it. Like when church goers show more passion and energy about the color of the new carpet than they do about how to serve the community. Or when we

say we believe in prayer, but our prayers ask only that others will be changed or that the world will be changed, instead of asking God to change *me*. Or when we memorize the words of the Bible, but aren't interested in learning what it means to us *today*.

“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Attitudes and actions matter. As we come to the Lord's table, may we pray for the courage to be challenged and transformed ...To the glory of God!

AMEN.