

SERMON: God's Prerogative?

TEXT: Jeremiah 18:1-11

Years ago, I dated a guy who had a very strong belief in the power of prayer. One day he asked me to include his older sister in my prayers. She was expecting a baby and she wanted a boy with all her heart. For reasons I don't remember, it was a very big deal to her. By and large it was simply a matter of personal preference. But the ultrasound showed that she was having a girl. So my friend and his whole family were on their knees for weeks, fervently praying that God would change that girl fetus to a boy. Lo and behold, when it came time for her to deliver, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy. They all rejoiced that their prayers were answered!

Personally, I had misgivings about the whole thing. It's not that I doubt the power of God. I believe that all things are possible with God. But it just seemed rather trivial to me. I kept thinking about other babies being born, whose families were on their knees praying fervently for their very survival because of some life threatening illness or serious physical abnormality. Not that there's a limit to the number of prayers God can answer each day, but you know what I mean. It just felt wrong. Selfish. Unbalanced. Like a penny in a wishing well versus a tear-stained pillow.

It is situations like this that make God seem arbitrary. Are our prayers simply entered into a raffle, and then Jesus picks the winning tickets out of a hat? If I pray for my unemployed friend to get a job and he finally gets hired, I will lift up my voice with thanks and praise to God. But my perceived answer to prayer also means that perhaps dozens of other people didn't get their prayers answered because they didn't get the job.

If God blesses us with answered prayer, then doesn't it follow that others will suffer with unanswered prayer? And if we believe in John Calvin's idea of predestination – that God has chosen certain people for salvation, then “double predestination” – that others are condemned to eternal damnation – must be the other side of the coin. So to give God all the credit for our blessings, but none of the blame for our misfortune, doesn't make much sense. I confess that I have a really hard time with this kind of thinking.

And what really makes me angry is when someone tells you your faith must not be strong enough, or you've done something wrong, and that's why God doesn't answer your prayers. That's not the kind of God I believe in.

But that's almost how it appears in the scripture from the prophet Jeremiah. At first Jeremiah presents a beautiful, inspiring image of a potter working at his wheel, and we are the clay. The potter God is shaping and molding us into unique and useful creations. We even sing songs about it, that's how beautiful the image. But if we continue reading, we realize that what God is saying through Jeremiah, if I may paraphrase, is that God can smash us and start all over again if we don't shape up and become what God had in mind. "Just like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it."

This sounds like God is playing with us like a child playing with his toys. Our destruction is the result of God's whim, but if we beg and plead and promise to be good, then God will spare us – for now. Furthermore, as it has so often been said about women, is it GOD'S PREROGATIVE to change his mind?

And yet, even with all these questions and disturbing ideas about whether and how God interacts with us, I still want to believe that the universe is NOT random and that God IS positively involved and active in our lives.

One Biblical scholar suggested that, rather than *causing* certain events in our lives, God *uses* those events to shape and reshape us. Sometimes we create our own crises, and sometimes bad things just happen. But either way, God uses the crisis as an opportunity to interact with us, to change us and help us grow. “In Jeremiah 18,” the scholar writes, “*disaster* might be the mechanism for reshaping the people, but there is never a report that the Lord will reshape the people into something other than what the potter, the creator, intends. When *reshaping* comes, it will be the means for recreating the people into what God desires and plans.”

(John T. Debevoise, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, p. 30, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor)

The crises we encounter, the bad stuff that happens – those situations tend to shift our focus back to God, when we otherwise might not be paying attention. When all that we experience is blessing, we generally don’t stop to examine our lives; we don’t pause to look for God, because we’re too busy enjoying ourselves, merrily rolling along. Today’s lesson from the Gospel of Luke may be a fitting example.

Most of us like to read all the lovely, happy words from the Bible; we want to focus on the abundant mercy and steadfast love of God. But then we run across a passage like this, it stops us in our tracks: Jesus said to the crowds, “*Whoever*

*comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”*

In a weekly Bible Study at my last church, the ladies begged me to find an alternative translation for the word *hate*, hoping that perhaps the original Greek meant something different, something less harsh, something more gentle. I did dig a little deeper, hoping as they had hoped for something nicer. Unfortunately, the word *hate* is an accurate translation.

Is the Lord of love – the one who preached that we should love even our enemies – really commanding us to *hate* those who are nearest and dearest to us? None of us is likely to be convinced of that.

I think Jesus used the word intentionally, but he used it to shake us up, to stop us in our tracks, to make us think, to make us ask questions about what Jesus really wants from us and what discipleship really requires. You see, a life of discipleship is not all blessing and love and happiness. Following Jesus is costly. Following Jesus calls for great sacrifice. Following Jesus involves pain and suffering. And when Jesus says, “None of you can become my disciple if you do

not give up all your possessions,” he is not rejecting us, he is simply stating a fact. If you can’t put Jesus first in your life, you can’t call yourself a disciple.

It makes you think, doesn’t it? Maybe it even shakes your faith a bit. But it is this kind of crisis of faith that allows God to reshape us into new and better people.

It’s like when you start feeling poorly, or you begin having pain in a certain part of your body. Often your body is trying to tell you something. If you’re paying attention, you may realize that you need to change your diet or get more exercise. If you’re outside in the heat, you need to know the signs and symptoms telling you when to go inside, when to take a break, when to drink more water.

It’s like raising children. We mold them and shape them – often by telling them *no*, by giving them rules and boundaries, by not giving in to their every desire. Speaking of hating your family, our children sometimes express their hate for us when we set limits or keep them from doing what they want to do. But this is how they learn.

It might be simplistic, but I think God is like that. As God's children, we don't understand everything there is to know about God and how God interacts with us and with the world. But through all our learning and growing, through all our successes and failures, through all our confusion and doubt, God is there to mold us and shape us and love us through it all.

So may we allow ourselves to be clay in the potter's hand; may we believe in God's unfailing love for us; may we love our families, friends, and even our enemies as Christ has loved us; and may we strive to be faithful disciples, putting Christ first in all things... to the glory of God!

AMEN.