

GOOD AND EVIL

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, September 27, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Why Would He Do That? Oh, I Get It

I am told that this is the very first time in the history of the church and the history of our country that the Pope has addressed Congress. Never before. And so the first question that popped into my mind is, “Why would he do that?” It’s unprecedented. It’s a very short visit of just a few days. And why is he — forgive me, but the notion entered my mind — wasting his time doing that?

But then I remembered all the stories of Jesus being hassled because he was hanging out with sinners. All right, I get it. I understand now, of course. It is not the well who need a physician, but it is the sick.

So what did he tell Congress? I wasn’t there, but what I have been told, what I’ve read in the newspapers is that he told the representatives and senators about the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” in your legislating and in your negotiating with the other party, whatever it is.

The Golden Rule is the most concise and yet expansive ethical principle in the history of the world. It is found in every major religion and pretty much in every minor religion. Found across the world and across the ages. It is brilliant; it is inspired.

John 5-8: A One, Two, Three, Four Punch

Actually hearing about the Pope’s talk to Congress, having him hone in on such a

principle as the Golden Rule, reminded me of a lesson I was taught thirty years ago in seminary by one of my professors. He pointed out that there’s a section in the Gospel of John, Chapters 5 through 8, where it’s sort of like a one, two punch except that it’s a one, two, three, four punch that gets you back on the basics, going back to what’s really important in life rather than being distracted by peripheral matters.

And so you have these stories that everybody knows, but in their context it’s like you really sort of get the message from Jesus over the course of John 5 through 8. So what I’d like to do in recognition of what the Pope is trying to do for us is to look at these stories very quickly.

Chapter 5: It’s a Story of Healing The Man at the Pool of Siloam

When I was in Jerusalem a number of years ago, I had a chance to see this very space. It’s not much bigger than a really large hot tub, a little pool at the base of stone steps going down. It’s dry now; there’s no water there at all. But you can see where there was water and a stone patio all around it.

Apparently at the time of Jesus, invalids of one kind or another, regardless of what was wrong with them, would hang out at that pool in hopes that an angel would come down and stir the waters. Tradition had it that whoever jumped in first after the waters had been stirred would be healed. It happened about

once a year or so. So the invalids would hang out for a long, long time, hoping to have enough luck to be the one who jumps in first.

Except for one poor guy who waited thirty-eight years because he couldn't get up quickly enough. Somebody always got to the pool before he did. Thirty-eight years in an era with a life span somewhere between forty-five and fifty, or nearly all of his life.

According to Verse 15, after finally being healed, the man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. This was the reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, because he did this healing on the Sabbath.

So for starters, imagine for a moment that your priorities are *that* out of whack. To observe the sabbath was not a bad rule. It was a good rule. But here's a guy who had been lame for 38 years. "Oh, I'm sorry, can't heal you right now. Gotta wait until tomorrow."

Chapter 6: The Feeding of the 5,000

Later Jesus rejoins his disciples on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and he says in Verse 26, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life."

And then a little later, "I am [note the name of God in this sentence] the bread of life; one who comes to me shall not hunger, and one who believes in me shall never thirst." And then a bit later, "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

Chapter 7: The Feast of the Tabernacles

What's happening here in terms of context is that, although I haven't gone into it yet, but this is the time of the feast of Tabernacles.

It's in the fall, and Jews are sort of celebrating two things at the same time. One is that it's harvest time in the fall. It has a Thanksgiving kind of feeling to it. But this feast also celebrates and remembers the wandering in the wilderness and coming out of that deadly wandering into the land flowing with milk and honey.

At this point good old JC is sort of a wanted man because of the healing in the temple along with a number of other things. Despite being a wanted man, Jesus has something of an in-your-face attitude, and he goes directly to the temple and begins to teach.

You don't know this from the Bible, but you may know it from ancient Israelite history. Part of the ceremony at the temple in remembrance of the wandering was to take a golden pitcher and fill it with water from the pool of Siloam and then take it to the inner sanctum of the temple. There was the place where the golden pitcher was with the magic water in it.

As Verse 37 relates, "On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

Chapter 8: The Story of the Woman Caught in Adultery

A great story. But before we get to that, another part of the ceremony in that feast of Tabernacles at the temple was the lighting of the golden lamps, just like those that you might remember from the beginning of the Book of Revelation.

And now, having just left the temple, Jesus goes out into the street. Right at that time, he encounters a self-righteous mob wanting to test and trap *him* and wanting to stone *her*.

He says the famous line about letting him “who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” That’s the part everybody remembers.

But then, later in the conversation with the disciples and others who are hanging out, he says to those who weren’t anxious to leave after this *deadly* confrontation, “I am the light of the world.” In the text it looks like it just sort of comes out of the blue. It doesn’t have a context, and it doesn’t have continuity of thought.

If you remember, he had just emerged from the temple ceremony, where they lit these lamps and poured out that water from Siloam. “I am the light of the world. The one who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

There are bunches of other stuff mixed in these four chapters, but very briefly. I hope you get a sense of what is going on here. Healing a man who has been lame for 38 years, virtually all of his life, versus failing to observe the Sabbath.

Real literal bread or the bread of life. Or to put it another way, physical existence and the materiality of our world versus a life with meaning and spirit.

Observing a ceremony with water. Remembering a story of water from a rock during the wilderness wanderings. Or the rather outlandish and seemingly impossible teaching that the water of life is available to you here and now and always.

And then finally observing a ceremony when lamps are lit and realizing that the light of life can shine upon your life, your love anytime, anyplace in the here and now.

Here you have four examples of getting past all the distractions and into the heart of the matter.

So what good is this? Why might it be important? Why should you care? I’ll try to tell you why.

Insight from a Previous Sermon

A few Sundays back, I did a sermon entitled “The Memo That Started It All,” preached on September 13. I think you liked it; I’m not sure, but it was really important to me. It hones in deeply on the way I try to view the world in which I live. It was about Joseph Campbell and his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I went into a lot of detail on that story of the hero and then tried to make the connection that it is also our story. Each of us connects to it in our own way.

And the reason the book is called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is because there’s one hero, one story with a thousand variations. A thousand different ways in which it appears and works in our lives.

The Dangerous Quest of a Prince

So give me a few minutes to tell you the story. Usually in the form of a fairy tale, there is a prince who sets forth on a quest, which in the end brings him the hand of the beautiful princess.

But in the beginning, he’s warned by a sage of the dangers that he will encounter, deadly dangers. There are temptations to divert the prince from the quest, discouraging developments that will disappoint our hero and bring him dejectedly home, unfulfilled.

The path he follows is filled with dangerous precipices; dark forests; horrible, stinking swamps; and unmarked forks in the road. But

our prince is undaunted and declares that he will attain his quest.

And so he embarks. All goes smoothly for a time, just long enough to make him think that this journey won't be so bad. But then the dangers and the diversions begin, slowly at first, yet he keeps going. Then they come in earnest and threaten to overwhelm our hero, the prince.

But eventually he slays the dragon, outwits the evil sorcerer, resists all the various temptations to settle for something else, something second-best. At the end of the tale, he reaches the castle, defeats the evil despot, and weds the princess of his dreams.

Symbolic of the Soul's Union with God

This story, which we've all heard so many different times and in so many different variations, is symbolic of the soul's union with God, with the higher self, with the Holy Spirit. It is symbolic of the union of the lover with the beloved, of God and humanity, of Creator and creation.

And it is the story of every person. Your story, too.

Now about that story from the Book of Numbers. Moses struck the stone, and out poured water. Like, really? Out of a rock? Enough for all the children of Israel, for their sheep and their cattle and their donkeys and their camels. And camels drink a lot.

It was a flow of water in the middle of a desert!

And so, over the centuries, that story, in a very singular way, has become associated with one central message: With God, nothing is impossible. *With God, nothing is impossible.*

Water out of a rock? I'm not going out on a limb to say there's not a single person in this room who completely believes that. We've seen rocks. We've hit them with sticks before. No water.

With God, All Things Are Possible

World peace. An end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An end to hunger. An end to terrorism. An end to war. With God, all things are possible.

But obviously not yet, for we have not yet reached the castle.

But how do we remain undaunted? By attending to the heart of the matter. By remembering that the wholeness of your brother or sister is more important than any rule. By remembering that, while of course we need sustenance, the bread of life and the water of life are of more value.

Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these other needful things will be yours as well. What is really important has been hard-wired into our soul.

Our job is not to be distracted, diverted, but to remain undaunted.

Amen.