

THROWN OVERBOARD

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, October 23, 2016

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

Reflecting upon What's Good and Bad

“Thrown overboard!” This is the famous story of Jonah and the whale (Jonah 1:1-16). Julie Ann Johnson read up to and including the part about tossing the poor fisherman overboard. And you know the rest of the story, in which the whale or sea monster swallows Jonah, who spends three days in the belly of the whale. The creature finally spits him out, and he goes about his business.

Most people understand that this is usually not an ordinary kind of adventure. But upon reflection, it shows that our judgements of what is good and what is bad are mostly unreliable. They are compromised.

There's a classic Zen story that illustrates this truism. It goes like this:

Once upon a time, there was an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit and console him.

“Such terrible luck,” they said sympathetically.

“Well, maybe,” replied the farmer.

The next morning his horse came back, bringing three wild horses with it. The neighbors returned to gape at the new horses.

“How wonderful,” they exclaimed delightedly.

“Well, maybe,” uttered the old man.

On the following day, his son tried to ride one of the unbroken horses. He was thrown and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer solace on his son's misfortune.

“How unfortunate,” they offered sympathetically.

“Well, maybe, answered the farmer.

The day after that, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors came once more to congratulate the farmer.

“How well things turned out,” they said happily.

“Well, maybe,” muttered the old man.

There's also the story of Carl Gustav Jung, a notable Swiss psychiatrist, who had a client with multiple issues. One day, the client came in, complaining that, on top of all the problems he was suffering from, he had just been fired. Jung is reported to have said, “Wonderful. Now we can accomplish something.” If you were in the therapy business, you would know that has the ring of truth.

Changes in the Mores of Our Society

In our judgements of the mores of our society, what we collectively decide is good or bad, moral or immoral, has changed immensely over the generations.

Our generation has seen great change in what society believes about homosexuality. It was once bad, very bad, but now the majority of our society says it's just fine. Actually it's good.

A troublesome moral custom that I find fascinating is usury, the charging of interest. It used to be sinful to charge interest. As a matter of fact, only the church, when making a loan, could do that, which was a problem because the Jews also were charging interest, and this angered the church.

Usury, even the definition of the term, has changed over the course of several hundred years. It used to mean just charging interest, and that was bad enough, but now it is charging too much interest, and it signifies gouging or exorbitant interest. Think credit cards!

For another example of changing mores, corporal punishment used to be accepted a generation or two ago — spare the rod, spoil the child. Yet now it's often seen as a form of violence to be avoided.

There are further examples such as premarital sex and marijuana usage. Yes, the mores of our society have been and are still changing.

The Unifying Principle: It's All Good

Flying in the face of these judgements about what's good and what's bad is a spiritual principle that is extraordinarily difficult to accept. This is a principle that 99.9 percent of our culture doesn't believe. (Among spiritually sensitive people, perhaps only 99 percent still don't believe it.) It's that difficult.

It's that hard. And the principle is this: It's all good. It's ALL good.

It is part of a larger unifying principle that divinity is infused into the entirety of creation. Spirit is infused into the material realm, and thus, in a sense, it is all linked to God. Nothing is without Spirit, thus it's all God. Therefore, it's all good.

Let me remind you: Most people don't believe a word of it. For example:

- So a man gets fired and his therapist says: "Wonderful!"
- Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."
- Saint Paul: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose."
- Genesis: God looked at the entire creation and called it good, *very* good.
- A book I read years ago bore the title, *It's All God*, with the subtitle, *The Flowers and the Fertilizer*.

So Now, What about Jonah?

Since when is being thrown overboard a good thing? Here's an enigmatic passage, an extremely difficult passage, to interpret from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is clearly not in a good mood here (Matthew 12):

"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.' But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous

generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!”

Anybody want to tell me what that means? What is the “sign of Jonah?”

If people ask a legitimate question, they’re asking for a sign. They’re trying to decide (and I think without any guile, giving them the benefit of the doubt) are you the Messiah? Give us a sign. We’re not sure. And Jesus is really testy here. The only sign you’re going to get is the sign of Jonah, which isn’t a pleasant thought if you think about it.

An Archetypal Pattern of Interpretation

However, let me take a stab at interpreting this for you. The sense I get is that there is an archetypal pattern going on here:

- Going into the belly of the whale — a deeply negative thought, a negative experience, and then being spit out right where you need to be.
- A Paschal mystery, Good Friday — suffering, death, hell, resurrection, ascension, heaven. Look at that, down and up. Stomach acid from a whale, spit out where you need to be.

- Indigenous religions — often start with autumn, the dying of the leaves, then the “death” of winter, followed by the “rebirth” of spring, and the “fullness” of summer.
- The Eastern religions of yin and yang — and the flow of that.
- Psychology — entering the shadow, then to emerge with healing.
- Catharsis — allowing the negative to have its full effect, cry it out. And then wholeness, then health, then at least a chance of joy.

Contrast those kinds of understandings, those spiritual understandings, with a meeting that we had last week with Estabrook Capital Management. I’d like to compare and contrast them here.

Contrasting Patterns of Humor in Finance

Our church has an endowment, thank goodness. It pays for more than half our church budget. And so we meet with our investment people once a year or twice a year. Having attended dozens of such meetings over the course of my career, there’s a pattern. The pattern is pretty humorous in a number of ways, and it goes like this:

The investment people come in and say, “We’re thrilled with the results of what we have done for you.” Now this doesn’t matter if they’ve had a net loss or a net gain, they’re always thrilled with the great job they have done for you.

And the church says, “We would like to remind you that this money is near and dear to us. It supports our programs, our budget, our church, our plant, all those things, and we

rely a great deal upon that money. It's important to us, and we want you to keep it coming.

The investment people then say, "Well, let us remind you that this return on your money is based upon the stock market, which has ups and downs. It doesn't continually go up. Sometimes it comes down, and we try to take these cycles into account."

And then the church says, "Yeah, well, whatever. However, we need the money to keep coming."

And they say, "Got it. We hear you. We'll do our best. Thanks for the lunch. Everything should be okay. Everything should be getting better."

That's sort of the way the conversation goes with these people over the years.

Climb Down Ladders for a Clod of Earth

So now, you've got the belly of the whale, the Paschal mystery, Carl Jung saying, "Wonderful" to his client who just got fired. The capitalist drive is always to get better, ever upward: growth, **GROWTH, GROWTH.**

So now let me share a few insights from a trio of my teachers. The first one is Fr. Richard Rohr. Let me quote him:

- "We seldom go freely into the belly of the beast. Unless we face a major disaster such as the death of a friend or a spouse, or the loss of a marriage or a job, we usually will not go there. As a culture, we have to be taught the language of descent because we are by training capitalists and accumulators. Mature religion shows us how to enter willingly and trustingly into

the dark periods of life. These dark periods are good teachers."

In other words, it's all good.

The German mystic Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1328) said in essence that:

- "The spiritual life has much more to do with subtraction than with addition." I suggest to you that this is a profound thought: Is the gospel a matter of adding onto our lives or might it be removing all that is extraneous until we are naked souls before the loving essence?

Going back to Carl Jung, when he was an old man in his eighties, one of his students had been reading John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and asked the professor, "What's been *your* Pilgrim's Progress? It's a metaphor for all of us. What has been your pilgrimage?" Jung answered thus:

- "In my case, Pilgrim's Progress consisted in having to climb down a thousand ladders until I could reach out my hand to the little clod of earth that I am."

That, my friends is a free man! Free from ego, from reputation, from our self-image, from our need to be right, from our need to be successful, from our need to have everything under control.

We Are Earth Come to Consciousness

Let me remind you of one other thing you already know: The word "human" comes from the Latin *humus*, which means soil, earth, dirt. Being human means acknowledging that we're made from earth, and to earth we will return.

And so for a few years, we dance around on the stage of life and have a chance to reflect at least a little bit of God's glory. We are earth that has come to consciousness. If we discover this power in ourselves, if we remember it and recognize it, If we learn that we are God's creatures and that we come from God and return to God, then we are never really apart from God. That's enough.

As a human, I'm just a tiny moment of consciousness, a small part of creation, a particle reflecting only a fragment of God's glory. and that is enough.

Actually, that's plenty.

Amen.