

“The Ways of the World, The Ways of God”

June 10, 2007

1 Kings 17:8-16

Psalm 146

*Opening words*

Jesus’ mission wasn’t to improve the old; his mission, and the mission he gave his disciples, was to embody the new – an entirely new way of doing life. It is a life lived within the realm of God; life centered on God as the sole source of one’s security, worth, and significance; life lived free from self-protective fear; and life manifested in Calvary-like service to others. His promise is that as his disciples manifest the unique power and beauty of this life, it will slowly and inconspicuously – like a mustard seed – grow and take over the garden.

– Gregory A. Boyd

One of the criticisms I’ve heard about church in the last few years came from a woman I knew in two different contexts. I’ll call her “Mary.” Mary was a member of the church where I was a student minister, and, at the time we had this conversation, she had recently started going to the same Alcoholics Anonymous meetings that I regularly attended. One morning after an AA meeting, with a mixture of gratitude and exasperation – gratitude, that is, for AA and exasperation with the church – Mary told me, “I love it here. People in AA are so real. We talk about real things here; we never do that at church.” I thought – and still think – that “never” was a little too strong, but I also had to admit that Mary had a point. An important, challenging, life-giving point.

So this morning, in honor of Mary and her critique of church, I want us to start by getting real. I want us to start by admitting some truths that we’d much rather deny or ignore. I want us – you and me – to get real about whether we live our lives by trusting in the ways of the world or by trusting in the ways of God.

Let’s combine this morning’s opening words from Gregory Boyd with the reading from 1 Kings and with Psalm 146. When I combine all three, these are the questions I hear. What do you and I think of as the source of our security, our worth, and our significance? Or, to ask the question in a more *real* way, what does how you and I *live our lives* say about what we believe is the source of our security, our worth, and our significance? Do our choices, day after day, reveal that we trust in God for meaning and sustenance ... or do those choices show that we depend, instead, on the rulers and ideologies of the world? Do we depend on the political, economic, and religious rulers and ideologies – to name just a few – to keep us safe, to give us a sense of importance, and to keep our jars of food and our jugs of oil (or wine) full?

Or, to put the question in yet another, more specific way, what do we do when we hear the word of God telling us to welcome and feed the stranger from across the street or across the world? Do we trust in God’s abundance and share what we have, as the widow did with Elijah, or we do we put our trust in the world as a place of scarcity and so keep a tight, fearful grip on what we have?

One of the more in-your-face ways I’ve heard to answer these questions honestly is to start by perusing one’s own checkbook, credit card bill, and on-line banking statement. I want you to imagine doing that in the privacy of your own home. What do

you see? What are the priorities that emerge? Look at the record of your decisions; follow the money. Where does it go? What does it suggest is most important to you? And what's missing?

Here in this church, we claim to be created and guided by the God who calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. That sure sounds to me like a call to love our neighbors *as much as* we love ourselves. As much as – not more, not less. And if I remember my algebra correctly, if something is neither more than nor less than something else, the two things are *equal*. So, if we seek to respond to God's call to love our neighbors equally as much as we love ourselves, how do our financial records say we're doing? If God came to us individually and said, "Show me the money," what would God see? If God came to us as a church, what would God see? Would it be anything close, anything remotely similar, to a 50-50 split between our neighbors and ourselves? Maybe it would be for you, but it wouldn't be close for me or for this church. ... And, I'll tell you, thinking about trying to reach a goal of 50-50 starts to make the meager 10% of tithing sound like an absolute breeze!

But, for now at least, let's put aside the question of how far any of us may be from a 50-50 split or from the Biblical and traditional standard of tithing. Go back to the question of where your money actually goes. What does that tell you about what you believe is the source of your security, your worth, or your significance? Does it look as though the source of those things is what you own, what you drive, where you live, what you experience? Does how you spend your money – or, in my case, how you *hope* to spend your money – tell you, as it told me a month or so ago, that you've fallen into the trap of believing that your security and maybe even your significance come from having your own name on the title of the home where you live?

In some ways, it's easy to realize that we've fallen into the trap of believing that money and the tangible things of this world are the source of our security and significance. Getting out of that trap and letting go of that way of life may be difficult – it may even seem impossible – but *seeing* that we we're in it isn't so hard. What's much harder to recognize, and what may even take the emotional and spiritual equivalent of an earthquake for us to see, is that we're using other things in our lives to feel safe and to tell ourselves that we matter. Without realizing that we're doing it, we can turn our talents, our identities, our past, our jobs, and even our families into gods. We can invest them with the power to define us, to make us somebody, and to give us a sense of security.

Over 20 years ago, I experienced one of those emotional and spiritual earthquakes that showed me I had turned something that wasn't God into one of my most important gods. It was a frightening, unsettling experience. It changed me, and I'll always be grateful for the change.

It happened one August afternoon. The fall semester of my third year in law school had just begun, and I was bicycling to an appointment in Oakland. I was coming to the bottom of a hill, where I would have to turn right and head right back up another hill. I was concentrating on keeping up as much speed as possible, so I didn't see the big bump just ahead in the pavement. My front tire hit that bump, and, suddenly, I was going forward without my bike. I went over the handlebars and landed on my head and my shoulder.

The blow to my head felt so bad that I was sure my helmet had come off before I hit the pavement, but I was wrong. My helmet had stayed on my head and had saved my

life. It saved my life, but it didn't save me from a concussion. The next morning, the doctor made her diagnosis pretty quickly, both from how uneasily I walked and from how v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y I answered her when she asked me to explain the meaning of the saying, "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

With one bicycle accident, I had gone from a young woman who thought of her intellect as her strength, her protection, and the source of meaning in her life ... to a young woman who literally couldn't add 35 and 8. I returned to my classes, but neither the professors nor the textbooks made much sense anymore. The doctor assured me that the effects of the concussion would wear off, but she didn't know when and I wasn't sure I believed her, anyway. I had lost the abilities that had made me feel safe. The ability I had put at the center of who I was and why I mattered was gone, and it stayed "gone" for over three months. In those months, in some ways to my surprise, I discovered that I was still a person. I was still someone of value; I was still one of God's blessed creations, even though the little god of my intellect had been knocked off its throne.

Three months of a concussion can seem insignificant next to other losses and emotional earthquakes that shake our beliefs about who we are and why we matter. We've probably all either known *or been* people who felt utterly lost when a job or career ended, when divorce transformed a marriage into a source of pain and bitter memories, or when a beloved daughter or son died far too young. We've probably all known *or been* people who felt stripped of their sense of safety and significance without the status and structure of a job or career ... people who felt stripped of their identity and future without their marriage or relationship ... or people whose life felt stripped of meaning and hope without the sight and sound of their child. Some people experience the impermanence of the things of this life and this world, and they never recover. The pain is too great, the disillusionment too deep, and the fear too overwhelming. Others, though, don't sink under the weight of the loss. They sink, instead, into the love and grace of God.

Stripped of the things that we thought made us who we were, we can become aware that God, the Spirit of Life, is the source of everything that matters. When we are lost in despair, confusion, or anger because the things of this world have hurt, betrayed, and disappointed us, we can take our anguish, our uncertainty, and our rage to God. We can bring all of who we are and have been, and we can discover that God is much larger and more permanent than anything we can imagine. Then we can join Paul in saying that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any thing else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God."

The things and ways of this world will pass away. Many of them are lovely. Many of them are grace-filled, inspiring, fun, healing. Many of them are simply magnificent. But all of them are impermanent. Never mistake God's gifts to us in this life for God. In God and in God alone can we find lasting security, worth, and significance. The Good News here is that when we finally understand and accept God as our source and our life, there is no longer any need for self-protective fear. (That doesn't mean that the fear won't still come from time to time, but it does mean we don't have to embrace it as our protector and guide.) God's promise is that nothing can separate us from the *love* that is our source, guide, and destination.

Never depend on the rulers born of the earth, says the Psalmist. Share whatever you have, says the word of the Lord to the widow. Trust that there will be enough, says

Elijah. It may be simple, but it's not easy. But, no matter how difficult it can seem to live as God's people, I want you to know that although we may not be doing it perfectly, it is happening here, in you and in this congregation. With love that crosses the boundaries that divide us, with laughter that brings healing, and with forgiveness for our mistakes both large and small, we are discovering our security, our worth, and our significance in the simplest truth of all ... the truth that we are God's beloved, in a world filled with God's beloveds. In that truth we receive our hope, our joy, and our blessing.

Enjoy the gifts of family and friendship, of talents and abilities, of good food and good music. Yet always remember that the things of this world are perishable; they are impermanent. It is the love of God that lasts forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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