

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday closest to June 1

Proper 4

Year C

RCL

1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43

Psalms 96:1-9

Galatians 1:1-12



The Collect

O God, your never-failing providence sets in order all things both in heaven and earth: Put away from us, we entreat you, all hurtful things, and give us those things which are profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Kings 8:22-23 ,41-43

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. He said, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart.

“Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name – for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm – when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has

been invoked on this house that I have built.”

Psalm 96:1-9

Psalm 96 Page 725, BCP

Cantate Domino

- 1 Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the whole earth.
- 2 Sing to the LORD and bless his Name;
proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day.
- 3 Declare his glory among the nations
and his wonders among all peoples.
- 4 For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised;
he is more to be feared than all gods.
- 5 As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols;
but it is the LORD who made the heavens.
- 6 Oh, the majesty and magnificence of his presence!
Oh, the power and the splendor of his sanctuary!
- 7 Ascribe to the LORD, you families of the peoples;
ascribe to the LORD honor and power.
- 8 Ascribe to the LORD the honor due his Name;
bring offerings and come into his courts.
- 9 Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness;
let the whole earth tremble before him.
- 10 Tell it out among the nations: "The LORD is King!
he has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."
- 11 Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;
let the sea thunder and all that is in it;
let the field be joyful and all that is therein.
- 12 Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy
before the LORD when he comes,
when he comes to judge the earth.
- 13 He will judge the world with righteousness
and the peoples with his truth.

Galatians 1:1-12

Paul an apostle – sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – and all the members of God’s family who are with me,
To the churches of Galatia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or

an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

SERMON

A thousand years before Paul's time, Solomon built the great First Temple in Jerusalem and dedicated it in a long prayer. In that prayer, he said:

Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name – for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm – when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

Now, given all the trouble Paul experienced a thousand years later with his mission to the gentiles, that's a darned impressive thing for Solomon to say, don't you think? "... when a foreigner comes and prays toward

this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you ...”

It’s an impressive thing for Solomon to say because of what he didn’t say. For instance, he didn’t say, “When a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then grab him and circumcise him quick that he might be like us”. He didn’t say, as would later be the case, “When a foreigner comes and prays toward this house from the inner court then take him by force and stone him for his presence in the Temple of the LORD is an abomination.”

Solomon is including all of God’s creation in his statement and presenting God as the God of everyone, tinker, tailor, beggar man, thief, Jew or Gentile. In Paul’s time, the vision of Solomon had become shockingly narrowed. That’s what led to so many disputes between Paul and the rest of the church. What sort of hoops must one jump through to get right with God?

Paul made a journey into Galatia at some point (it's not clear on which of his journeys this happened) and founded churches, teaching them the gospel of grace. In Paul's teaching, human beings get right with God not through obeying the Law, but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. We are adopted as God's children solely as a result of Christ's redemptive death, not because of anything we have done or could do.¹ The impulse to save us originates with God.

Later, missionaries from Jerusalem, Jewish Christians just like Paul, arrived at those churches and brought a different message. They said that to get right with God you have to get right with Jewish law and festivals. It's important to keep in mind that these missionaries are Christian. They are not Jews seeking to undermine the new churches. They are Christians and they

¹ The New Interpreter's Bible, "Galatians" p. 187 Copyright 2000 Abingdon Press

are offering their understanding of the Gospel, honestly held, but at loggerheads with the teachings upon which Paul founded the churches. Paul is furious.

And so the stage is set.

Recently, the headlines have been blaring that Pope Francis said that atheists go to heaven and since he's infallible, then it must be true. This reflects more upon the appalling state of religious illiteracy that infects the 21st Century than upon what the Pontiff said. He wasn't speaking ex cathedra so what he said isn't infallible, and he didn't say that anyway. Here's what he said:

The Lord created us in His image and likeness, and we are the image of the Lord, and He does good and all of us have this commandment at heart: do good and do not do evil. All of us.
'But, Father, this is not Catholic! He cannot do good.' Yes, he can. He must. Not can: must!
Because he has this commandment within him.
Instead, this 'closing off' that imagines that

those outside, everyone, cannot do good is a wall that leads to war and also to what some people throughout history have conceived of: killing in the name of God. ... And that, simply, is blasphemy. To say that you can kill in the name of God is blasphemy.

“Instead,” the Pope continued, “the Lord has created us in His image and likeness, and has given us this commandment in the depths of our heart: do good and do not do evil”:

The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! ‘Father, the atheists?’ Even the atheists. Everyone! And this Blood makes us children of God of the first class! We are created children in the likeness of God and the Blood of Christ has redeemed us all! And we all have a duty to do good. And this commandment for everyone to do good, I think, is a beautiful path towards peace. If we, each doing our own part, if we do good to others, if we meet there, doing good, and we go slowly, gently, little by little,

we will make that culture of encounter: we need that so much. We must meet one another doing good. ‘But I don’t believe, Father, I am an atheist!’ But do good: we will meet one another there.”

“Doing good” the Pope explained, is not a matter of faith: “It is a duty, it is an identity card that our Father has given to all of us, because He has made us in His image and likeness. And He does good, always.”²

Of course, the press confused “redeemed” with “goes to heaven” and thus emphasized how trivial is the understanding of the Christian faith in contemporary America, which understands the point of being a Christian to be to go to heaven when you die, and that the way to do that is to please God while you’re here. No wonder Paul was furious! If you could be good enough to win a place for yourself in heaven, why did Jesus go

² http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/05/22/pope_at_mass:_culture_of_encounter_is_the_foundation_of_peace/en1-694445 of the Vatican Radio website

to the cross? You have no need of a savior. You can do it all by yourself!

This is the place where things get awkward because I think I hear a buzzing in your heads protesting that this is not what you were always taught. You were taught that God sits upon his throne with a score book and you have to please God by living a life of faith or you get points off and won't go to heaven when you die and anything else is heresy. Well, that's the Freewill Baptists, but that's not the Presbyterian understanding. This is a church founded upon the understandings of John Calvin. It is a confessional church, a creedal church. The confessions, we are told, are to be used for the education of leaders and members of the church in the right interpretation of Scripture and church tradition and to guard against the danger of individuals or groups selecting from the Bible or church tradition only that

which confirms their personal opinions and desires. The Second Helvetic Confession teaches us in the Book of Confessions that:

FAITH IS THE GIFT OF GOD. But this faith is a pure gift of God which God alone of his grace gives to his elect according to his measure when, to whom and to the degree he wills ...

If Faith is a pure gift of God which God alone of his grace gives to his elect and atheists do not enjoy this gift of faith but still live lives of compassion and caring for others, what is the big earthquake when the Pope says, “The Lord created us in His image and likeness, and we are the image of the Lord, and He does good and all of us have this commandment at heart: do good and do not do evil. All of us”? Can not those who have received the gift of faith meet those who have not in the doing of good? Can not those who have received the gift of faith meet those who have not in confronting

those forces which threaten to drag us to doom?

Furthermore, if faith is a pure gift of God, how is it that those who have received it would view the gift of faith as a commentary on their personal worth? How did “getting to heaven” become a wall between those who have received the gift of faith and those who have not? Are we really so self-involved? That “getting into heaven” wall has to be torn down. If our Christian faith were all about “what’s good for me, ultimately” it would be a fragile reed indeed. It would be like a mother dressing her child appropriately for the weather, not out of love for her child, but so that the other mothers could feel ashamed. As Paul wrote:

Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

The Presbyterian Church teaches that the gift of

faith is a pure gift of God, not something won by human effort, as suggested by the Jewish-Christian missionaries, and thus no cause for a personal celebration of individual worth. If the faith of our fathers be turned into something so trivial as “what do I need to do to get into heaven”, Paul would be justified (no pun intended) in rising from the grave and giving us a good slap on the forehead.

We live in a time when the apostolic authority to which Paul appealed has atrophied to virtually nothing. People describe themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious”. The church has become the last refuge of gray heads and Sunday School children. God is essentially unknowable, we think, so my ideas about God are no more valuable than your ideas. There are as many gospels as there are people and Paul got his knickers in a twist over nothing. This is the victory of heresy – that

the traditions of the church mean nothing.

But Paul rails at the church in Galatia and insists that they are not free to embrace just anything or everything or even nothing at all. There is but one gospel and it is not of human devising.

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Those given the gift of faith will not treat the teachings of the church and the Scriptures with disdain. They will instead drink deeply from the traditions of the church and the canon of Scriptures. These are the only springs from which that peculiar thirst can be quenched. In doing so, they will carry the story and the gospel forward. They will join hands with those of little faith, and even those of no faith. They will join hands with Mus-

lims and Buddhists and atheists and agnostics, and those only peripherally interested in the church but committed to compassionate living which is the root of good in all creation, and they will bring to God's creation the shalom which is its rightful inheritance.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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