

Oct 23, 2022

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

If God Is For You

John 9:1 ff

“As (Jesus) walked along, he saw a man who was blind since birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind that God’s works might be revealed through him. We must work God’s works while it is day. The night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I wish to be Light to the World.’”

Romans 8:31b ff

“If God is for us, who can be against us?...No, in all circumstances we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

“If” - as in “If God is for us...?”

When you come to an “If” like that in the bible - stop.

It means you are at a spiritual crossroads,
so don't just cruise right on through.

Think about that “If”

as if you are facing a soulful choice.

You can go one way or the other.

And when it comes to healing,
today's “If” is especially important.

“If God be for us, who or what can be against us?”

Let me tell the story of Jeff. (Not his real name)

Years ago he came to me with the devastating news
that he had cancer.

That was scary enough, but to complicate matters
he was certain his cancer was the result
of having cheated on his wife
and he was being punished by God.

Immediately I thought to myself,

“If God is against him who can possibly help him?”

His beliefs could very likely kill him.

And it became clear to me as his pastor
that it was my duty to change his belief if possible.

To help him believe that God -
the Giver of Life & Source of Holy Love -
was FOR HIM not against him.

Meryl Jordan, in his insightful book that has change my life as a pastor, entitled, "*Taking On The Gods*", says,

"Confronting those psychic structures, forces, stories and rituals which masquerade as God, (and replacing them) with love, faith and hope is being an (healing) extension of Jesus Christ."

Certainly an extension of the Jesus we meet in this morning's healing story.

"As (Jesus) walked along, he saw a man who was blind since birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind that God's works might be revealed through him.

I dearly tried to help my friend, Jeff come to know and trust this God as he battled his cancer. And I dearly wish so many would come to believe in this God, who is FOR them - not against them. A God who is FOR healing & blessing & love & hope.

But alas, there are so many who believe "God is against them".

Sadly, this "Against" God comes in several different and all too common spiritual wrappings - for this pre-Halloween season let's call them scary wrappings.

A 1st kind of scary wrapping is hurtful parenting.
There are those who, since early childhood,
experienced motherly or fatherly neglect, or alcoholism
or mental illness,
and these experiences sent the message:
“You aren’t lovable”,
“You won’t amount to anything,
“You are to blame for someone else’s failures.”

Now, to a little child,
the voice of a mother or a father
is almost like the voice of God.
And those little hearts believe, “God is against them.”

A 2nd kind of scary wrapping is magical thinking.
There are those who believe Fate is against them,
or that they are naturally Unlucky and always will be.
My personal version of this magical thinking
is that computers hate me.
Now, I realize that sounds foolish,
but on a pure feeling level, it seems I touch them
and they rebel!

But for many,
dark magical thinking is no laughing matter.
It starts early in life, when children lose their parents
to death or divorce at an early age.

Or they lose their home to fire, or storm or accident.
In any case, they come to believe,
an unlucky past guarantees an unlucky future.
And the problem is, notions like Fate, Karma, Luck,
have the clout of a G-O-D.
It's the spiritual equivalent of "God is against them."

A 3rd scary wrapping is fear-driven Christianity.
It happens to those who grow up
in a so-called "Christian" home,
who were decisively taught
that they were sinners - depraved and irredeemable.
They were raised to believe
they live on a slippery slope to hell,
and doubt they'll ever be good enough for heaven.

Much of this brand of God's "Against"-ness,
comes from the story of *Adam, Eve & The Garden of Eden*.
That story was the basis for the theology of "Original Sin"
thanks mainly to a bishop, in the 4th C.,
named Augustine of Hippo, from Northern Africa.
But long before he was a bishop, he was a scoundrel.
His life was a shambles of affairs,
illegitimate children and addiction to lust.
And, in the face of his beloved mother,
who was a devout Christian,
he was filled with guilt and shame.

But eventually Augustine, converted to Christianity.
And when he discovered the story of Adam and Eve,
it was easy to see in it his own story of depravity.

Now Augustine was gifted with great rhetorical skills,
And in his preaching, teaching and writing,
he convinced the church to believe in a strict theology
of “original sin” based on the Adam & Eve story.

But frankly, that’s NOT the only logical interpretation.
Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of that best-selling book,
Why Bad Things Happen To Good People,
also wrote a nice book entitled,
How Good Do We Have To Be?

In it he unpacks the story of *The Garden of Eden*
and notes that God originally threatened Adam & Eve
with punishment of death,
but later, when it came time to actually carrying out
his punishment, God softened!
God retreated from his initial severity
much the way many 1st-time parents do
when they see their beloved kids
struggling to grow and learn and stretch boundaries.

Kushner even brings out the detail
that Adam and Eve were both naked.

He asks, “Why do we assume they were adults?
Aren’t they portrayed more like infants?
And if so, isn’t that primordial story
more a story about original immaturity
rather than original sin?”

Friends, my point is this:

Whether you were wrapped in scary parental words
or wrapped in scary magical thinking,
or wrapped in scary theology,
all of it leaves a person burdened by their belief
That “God is AGAINST them” and if GOD is
against them - who can possibly be for them?”

In closing,
for the last two years or more,
we’ve become used to wearing masks as an act of love.
We’ve seen the logic of protection as healing.
Well, we find ourselves at a cross-roads moment
for the spiritual health of society in general
and Christianity in particular.
We need to apply that same logic
to protect a God who is love and blessing.
and fight against all those spiritual contagions
of an “Against God”, so that spiritual health
will prevail and it will not longer be a matter of
“IF God is for us, who can be against us?”

Prayer of Pastoral Care October 23, 2022 Dorset

Psalm 65 proclaims, "Praise is due to you, O God. To you who answer prayer!"

Our prayer response for today is: Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

Holy God, you promise to hear us when we pray, and shower us with unexpected blessings. You relieve our sufferings and fill us with good things. When we face the challenges that threaten to overcome us, you give us strength. With grateful hearts, we entrust our cares and concerns to you, praying

Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for an end to violence between nations, praying for the people of Ukraine. Be with them as they endure new bombardments in Kiev and throughout their land and on energy centers far from the front lines with the approach of winter. Be with everyone who suffers from the brutality of war.

Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

As we begin the season of voting, we pray for democracy in our country. We pray for the safety of public officials and election workers. May intimidation and threats of violence not rule our days. Be with those who are seeking asylum at our borders. We thank you for those who offer aid to refugees. And we pray for our Muslim neighbors, and for understanding and peace between people of all faiths in our world.

Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

Good and gracious God, you promise to pour out your Spirit upon us; you are the hope of the world. Give us strength, that we might serve you; make us humble, that we might live for your glory alone. On this healing Sunday, open our lives afresh to your healing presence. As we pray for healing for ourselves and others, may we forsake all that separates us from you, O God, and our neighbor. Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

We bring before you those on this church's immediate needs list. ...

Help us to pray with persistence. Gather up our prayers, O God, and those for whom we did not know how to pray. Make us ever more faithful as we lean into your coming kingdom of justice, peace, and love; through Jesus Christ, our light and our hope. Amen.

OFFERING

With humility for all that God has given us, let us gratefully give for the work of the church and the healing of this world.

*DOXOLOGY and *DEDICATION

Holy and merciful God, you know the joy that is in us when we offer ourselves, our time, and our possessions for the work you set before us. Use these gifts to heal and teach, to comfort and challenge, that all the world might give you praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.