

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, October 25, 2020

THE DIVINE BALANCE

(Reformation Day)

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

A banker called in a certain man to talk to him about his account. “Your financial affairs are a mess,” he said to the poor man. “Your wife constantly overdraws your account. She is behind in her charge accounts at the department store, and her check stubs are all added wrong. Why don’t you talk to her about it?”

“Because,” said the man, “I would rather argue with you than with her.” There’s a man whose marriage is badly out of balance.

Balance. We are all trying to find it, aren’t we? Balance between work and leisure. Balance between job and family. Balance between time devoted to church and time for ourselves. Balance between the foods we like and the foods that are good for us. Some creative person has done a satire on the creation story. Let me read portions of it.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth. And the Earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And Satan said, “It doesn’t get any better than this.” And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God said, “Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit,” and God saw that it was good. And Satan said, “There goes the neighborhood.”

Anyone who loves nature knows how important balance is. A small, mid-western town once sponsored a coyote hunt because so many farmers were losing chickens to the predators. Fifteen hundred coyotes were killed over a single weekend.

However, within a few months, the entire community was overrun with rodents, because their natural enemy, the coyote, had been eliminated. A year after that, rodents weren’t much of a problem, but rattlesnakes were! Because there were so many rats and mice for them to eat, poisonous snakes had reproduced rapidly.

At that point, chickens were safe, but humans were in danger! You see, coyotes had been an important part of the environmental system—the food chain. When one part of that system changed, other parts adapted to the new reality.

Balance is so important in all of life. This is even true in understanding the nature of the Christian life. Ever since Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses on the door at Wittenburg setting off the Protestant Reformation, the Christian community has struggled with balance between faith and works.

Are we saved by our faith? Or are we saved by our good deeds? It made headlines when Roman Catholic theologians agreed that to a certain extent Luther was right. Good works by themselves are not sufficient to heal the breach between humanity and God. Something more is required. And yet what do we do with other portions of Scripture that a tree shall be known by its fruit?

We even find this dilemma in our lessons for the day. In Romans 3:28 we read “So we are saved by faith in Christ and not by good things we do.” But then in John 8:31 we read, “Jesus said to them, ‘You are truly my disciples if you live as I tell you to...’” (LB) Well, which is it? Is it faith or right living that makes us acceptable to God? A little balance is called for here. What is required of us? What is necessary?

First of all, we need to acknowledge that God saves us. We are saved by what Christ did for us on Calvary. That’s “grace” Paul writes in Romans 3:25, “God sent Christ Jesus to take the punishment for our sins...He used Christ’s blood, and our faith, as the means of saving us...”

A few years ago, evangelist Anne Graham Lotz visited a woman on death row. The woman was convicted of multiple murders. During her time in prison, the woman had become a Christian. As her execution date approached, the woman became afraid that maybe her sins were too big to be forgiven. Maybe God’s grace wasn’t meant for someone like her.

Anne asked the woman if she had ever been to the beach. Had she ever seen holes in the sand? For instance, the ghost crab makes tiny pinholes in the sand. Little children digging make bigger holes. And giant, earth-moving equipment will dig even deeper holes. Well, Anne continued, when the tide comes in, doesn’t

the water cover everything? In the same way, she said, God's grace is sufficient to cover any sin, no matter how large that sin may be.

Our faith is a response to Christ's saving action on the cross. We did not deserve for Christ to die for us. It was purely an act of God. The only requirement is that we believe Christ has saved us. The only requirement is that we trust in the power of God's love for us.

Having said that, though, it is equally true that saving faith bears fruit. If I say that I believe that a certain bridge will support my weight, but I refuse to cross that bridge, it is questionable whether my faith in that bridge is authentic. In the same way, if I say God so loved the world that God gave His Son to die on the cross in my behalf, and I refuse to live a life of loving service in response to that act, there is a legitimate question whether I really believe God's love is that powerful after all. Faith and works are both a response to what God has done in Christ.

In his book *In Living Faith*, former President Jimmy Carter tells about a group of Christian laymen involved in missionary work who approached a small village near an Amish settlement. Seeking a possible convert, they confronted an Amish farmer and asked him, "Brother, are you a Christian?"

The farmer thought for a moment and then said, "Wait just a few minutes." He wrote down a list of names on a tablet, and handed it to the missionary. "Here is a list of people who know me best. Please ask them if I am a Christian."

Certainly, he had a point. "Each tree is known by its fruit," said Jesus. (Luke 6:44)

So, are we saved by our faith, or our works? The answer is, we are saved by God. Our faith, and our works, are a loving response to what God has done in Christ. An African proverb put it like this: "God made the sea, we make the ship. He made the wind, we make a sail. He made the calm, we make oars." That's balance.

AMEN!