

“Spending Eternity with Your Worst Enemy”

John 12:20-33

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As some of you are aware, there is going to be a basketball game later this afternoon. There will be more than one basketball game, but I'll be watching the one at 4:00 p.m. unless something happens, like the second coming. I'll tell you this, however. If I had to choose between watching that basketball game and preaching this sermon, I would preach this sermon every time. I don't know who's going to win that basketball game, though I'm afraid North Carolina probably will. This scripture tells us who is going to win, and folks, we're on the winning side.

This is an easy sermon for me to preach. I thought about some other jobs that would be easy. Think about being Tiger Woods' golf coach. That's a pretty easy job, isn't it? You just hand him a club and say, "Swing away." If you were a diaper salesman, think about having the "octomom" as one of your customers. You'd sell a lot of diapers, wouldn't you? I've got one more. How would you like to be Dr. Phil's hair stylist? That's an easy job. My job is easy today preaching this scripture.

I love the scripture Leigh read from Jeremiah. It tells us something important about the nature of God, something I believe we all know instinctively. Do you remember the wonderful story about Helen Keller when she learned to communicate? Someone told her about Jesus for the first time and Helen Keller said, "I knew. I knew there was someone like him."

What is interesting to me is that some people seem to believe more in their sin than they do in the forgiveness of God. Some Christians seem to believe more in their sin than they do in God's forgiveness. In the light of these scriptures today, how could we believe anything else, unless perhaps we were like some of the people in our scripture today?

Did you hear, when I read the scripture, when the voice came from heaven John says, "All some people heard was thunder." Have you ever known anyone like that? All they hear in all of their lives is thunder. I know some people who hear the voice of God in their children's voices. Other parents, all they hear is thunder. I know some spouses who are in a loving relationship, and in the voice of their spouse they hear God's voice. In some marriages, all the spouses hear is thunder. Some hear

thunder. Why do you suppose that is so?

Sadly, in the church we often share thunder more than the voice of God. In the very first church I served there was a woman, I'll call her Miss Brooks as in "Our Miss Brooks." Remember that old television show about a school teacher who was always correcting everyone's grammar. It seems it was Miss Brook's mission in life to correct any grammatical mistake I might make.

Now realize, early in my ministry my preaching style was a combination of Al Sleet, the hippy, dippy weatherman and an obscene phone caller. So I needed some correction. Nearly every Sunday Miss Brooks had some correction or some "constructive criticism" to offer. One Sunday she came out the door and said, "Brother Wolfe, you used two hanging prepositions and three dangling participles today." I'm sure I said something like, "Sister Brooks, I appreciate your constructive criticism." What I really wanted to say was "Lady, I'd like to hang your preposition!" "I'd like to dangle your participle!"

How often in the church do we share thunder instead of God's voice. There are even scriptures that seem more like thunder than the voice of God, scriptures that are just the opposite of our scripture today:

"Not every one who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven."

Two men standing in a field; one will be taken, the other will be left behind. It's a parable about the last judgment.

Sheep and goats—in this parable we hear Jesus saying to the goats, "Depart from me. I never knew you." Thunder.

We have a choice, I believe. That's one thing the Bible offers to us. There are scriptures which portray a vindictive, judgmental, wrathful God, but there are scriptures like the one we have today that paint a portrait of a loving, forgiving God. The choice is ours about which kind of God we will believe. Be careful with your choice. The brilliant Christian author and thinker, C.S. Lewis, has written this:

"Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it

is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, hate, powerlessness, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.”

A part of what this means to me is that these scriptures are not just about the nature of God. These scriptures are about our nature, the kind of people we can be. These scriptures call us to share this News that seems to be even more than Good News; the best news. In the scripture from John we read about Jesus drawing all people to himself; not forcing, not coercing, not bludgeoning, but drawing.

Our faith teaches us that we are a part of this drawing, this reconciling love of God, and that we can influence others instead of believing that God is someone who is sitting around thinking about ways to judge us, remembering all the times we have failed. Instead, God is thinking of new ways to love us, both now and in the future. In our relationships with God and with each other, we are called as ones created in God’s image to share this reconciling love with all.

Did you notice the sermon title today? I always struggle with sermon titles. This past week I had four or five choices and I showed them to some of the staff. One of the titles was “The Attractive Savior,” the Savior who attracts all persons, the magnetic master. One of the titles was “Always Remember the God Who Forgets.” Another title was, “Did he really say ALL? Yes, he did.”

This title, “Spending Eternity With Your Worst Enemy.” Think about it, who is your worst enemy? Your worst enemy is not Osama Bin Laden. Nearly always our worst enemy is someone who is close to us—a family member, a co-worker or a person we thought was our friend. Does it mean ALL? Does it really mean that Christ will draw your worst enemy to himself? If that’s true, does it mean that you are going to spend eternity with your worst enemy? Or, is your worst enemy the person you see when you look in the mirror? Is that the worst punishment it could be, to spend eternity with yourself, with all of your vindictiveness, your attempts to get even, your unwillingness to forgive? Is that your worst enemy?

The truth of the scripture is this: what good is grace if it is offered only to those who don’t need it or try to earn it? Grace is offered to ALL because we ALL need it.

This past week there was a wonderful story on one of the morning news programs. It was about a couple named Bill and Bernadette Tobin.

They had been married for over 20 years, and as often happens in some marriages, they started to drift apart and were divorced. Four or five years after they divorce, it was learned that Bill Tobin needed a kidney transplant if he was going to live. You're already ahead of me . . . Bernadette turned out to be a match, and she offered to share her kidney with her ex-husband. As you can imagine, they became close once again, remarried and are together now. It was amazing to hear Bill Tobin talk about the love and acceptance of the wife he had mistreated when they had been married.

The Good News of the scripture is this: we need more than a kidney transplant. We need a heart transplant. In Jeremiah, God said, "No longer will the law be written on stone tablets. I will write the law on your hearts." Do you remember what Ezekiel said? "I will put a new heart within you." A heart transplant from God.

The "catch" if you will, is this, some kind of response is required. I don't know if we have any tax attorneys here this morning or anyone else who knows this for sure, but I did a little research on this. I think the maximum amount you can give to another person is \$12,000. I don't know for sure if that is right. I see a few people nodding their heads. I wish everyone could have a son-in-law like my son-in-law, Ryan, and I wish that I had enough money to write out a check to Ryan for \$12,000. I would love to be able to do that, but if I did, and I put it right here, it wouldn't do Ryan any good, obviously, unless he came up here, got the check and cashed it.

I believe what this scripture is saying to us is this: God has written another kind of check to each of us and to all of God's children. We can come up here and cash it every Sunday at this table. If we will pick up the check, we will see that it is made out to us, and the amount is "one son." One son for you.

Toward the end of the week, as I was finishing preparation for this sermon, I thought of one other sermon title that might be even better. The title I thought of was, "ALL includes YOU!" Each of us comes here this morning having said and done things that we would love to forget. It is that unattractive side of us, that side we don't want anyone else to see, but we know that God sees. The Good News of this scripture is this: We believe in a God who says to us, "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." Thanks be to God.

Amen