

“ACCEPTED - REJECTED”

Isaiah 58:3-9; Luke 17:11-19

Preached on November 23, 2008

I want to tell you a very sad story. Jesus had entered a village where he saw ten lepers, who stood at a distance and cried out for the Lord's help. Jesus said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests," for the law declared that anyone who is cleansed from leprosy must show himself to the priest to verify the healing. As soon as they started the journey they were healed. Then one of them, a Samaritan, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at the feet of Jesus, giving thanks. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Arise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

Now you may think that this is a sad story because nine of the ten did not return to give thanks for the healing they received. You may think that I will lament about how poor we are at offering thanks even after we have received such blessings in our life. All that may be true, but it is not why I have such sadness when I read this story of healing. No! It is sad because it is about a Samaritan who had no place to go. You see when an individual was diagnosed with leprosy they were immediately shunned from society. No one could come within 50 yards of them except another leper. In order for a leper to be accepted back into home, family, and society, a priest had to verify that the healing had taken place. But this Samaritan could not get that verification. He could not because he was a Samaritan, a half breed of race and faith and no self respecting priest would touch him even if he was healed. So here we have a man whose life was hopeless, yet God in Christ entered that man's life, gave him a new life. But even though he was accepted and healed by God, he was rejected by humanity; rejected by one who was to be a servant of God. How sad it is to see the people of God turn away from those whom God loves. Accepted by God, rejected by humanity. Too often it is the story of our world.

Isaiah felt that same sadness. When Isaiah looked upon his world he saw a prosperous society, one in which most people had a good measure of freedom. They could go where they wanted. Do what they wanted with only minor exceptions. They had been through the horrors of exile in Babylon, but now the Lord had delivered them into Canaan once again. It was a time of rejoicing and celebration. But as the society prospered they once again became more transfixed on accumulating wealth, in pampering themselves, than they were about helping those in need. When God handed down the law there were instructions to take care of the widows, orphans, and strangers in the land. These were people who did not have the support others had. It was necessary for society to care for them. But as the economy grew, as profits became a higher priority than people, these unfortunates were seen as an opportunity to gain greater wealth rather than an opportunity to serve God. And the business leaders of the day began to plot how this exploitation could be done quickly and efficiently without any regard for the fate of those poor children of God.

Amos earlier lamented how the poor would be sold for the same price as a pair of shoes, as if humanity had no value at all. They had no place to go. They had no one to support them, to help them, to care about them. And maybe worst of all was the attitude the society leaders developed. They would say, “These poor people are obviously being punished by God for the evil things they have done. We are the only true followers of God. We can tell because we have accumulated all this wealth.” In many cases wealth was accumulated by taking advantage of the desperate situations, taking advantage of the tragedies of world like we might see most any time a natural or man-made disaster hits. People were cheated out of their homes, forced off their land, and all the while the oppressors were saying, “See how pious we are. See how blessed we are. See how closely we follow God.”

Isaiah looked upon this scene and his heart wept, for he knew those poor children were accepted by God yet they were being abused and rejected by humanity. He watched in tears as the pious would go through their external rituals without seeking personal repentance or internal righteousness. He tried to help them understand what they were doing, simply going through the motions of praise and thanksgiving without ever working within the will of God. But they would not listen. Not only would they not listen, but Isaiah was told to just shut up. Just like they told Amos and Micah and Jeremiah, and all the prophets. Isaiah was told to stop preaching such foolishness. Stop preaching that there is a responsibility to care for those who cannot care for themselves. Stop preaching that these people could be accepted by God. That was ridiculous because humanity had rejected them. Isaiah was told to stop carrying around this ridiculous idea that a true thanksgiving would not just be a matter of saying a few good words, but an action of sharing the good things in life with the people who truly need them.

The true blessings from God are not wealth and material goods. And the love of God does not depend on wealth and material goods. It not a matter of rituals and animal sacrifices. The love of God does not depend upon appearances, upon being acceptable in society. God loves people, all people. Jesus came into our world to give himself for us, to rectify the broken relationship between deity and humanity. For God so loved the world that the only begotten Son was given that whosoever believed and accepted him would be accepted by him. Even with all our faults; even with all our evil thoughts and acts, God loves us. God is willing to accept us. God has shown his love by pouring his grace upon us in such abundance. And if God is willing to accept that person sitting beside you, if God is willing to accept the person living beside you, if God is willing to accept the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the male and female, the friends and the enemies, who are we to reject any of them? Who are we, or rather who do we think we are that we would be able to dictate to God who should be accepted, and who should be rejected?

We do not control God. Rather, we are the people of God. We are people who have entered into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. When we entered into that relationship we accepted a responsibility to act for God, to act with God, to follow the commands of Christ. In scripture we are told to do three things for the less fortunate of our world. First, we need to be ready to speak out like Isaiah did. It is sometimes dangerous to speak out against the leaders of this world. We see those dangers everyday in far away places like the Sudan, Iran, Cuba, China, Korea. Even though Israel is a free

country, speaking the truth can bring a deadly reaction to young and old alike. We've seen that year after year. Increasingly, we see a violent fringe react when they perceive that someone has spoken against them, or against what they believe. We have seen it in Britain and France; in Russia and Jordan; in Iran and Iraq; and we've seen it California just this week. Even in our own country, those who speak of another way are told not to preach like that, not to speak about that. Even in our own land we are often told to not speak about God. I have already been told not to speak about morality because there is freedom of religion. Yet freedom of religion and speech means that I have every right to speak about what is right and wrong according to my faith. And I will continue to speak. But it has not always been easy.

In school, around friends, in the workplace, if we mention church or faith or God, others will tell us not to preach. Perhaps not in so many words, but with their actions; with smirks and smiles and a roll of the eyes. Often we are intimidated by such things because we do not want to be rejected by humanity. But we are accepted by God. We are called by God. We go forth in partnership with God and with God, we need to speak. We need to inform those in power of the harm they do to their own spirit and to the well being of others. We need to offer hope to those who have no hope. We need to shine some light on those living in a dark, depressing world. We are the people of God and as such we must speak in God's name. That is how we truly show thanks to God, by sharing the grace and the prophetic witness he has given to us.

But speaking is just the beginning. Talk is cheap. It is actions that count. That's the second point. We need to go into the world just as Christ came into our world. We need to hear the cries of desperation that come from so many. We need to heal and comfort just as Jesus did for those lepers; just as our Lord has done for us. I know it is easier to look away from the pain than to look upon it. It is easy to excuse ourselves by saying that we cannot solve all the problems, but that does not mean we simply sit back? No!

I looked at our budget for out reach in 2009 and it is significant - \$34,700, and that doesn't include some of the local missions that we care for. Some might wonder why we continue to put out funds like that. AWhat if there is not enough left for us? What if there are people who don't deserve our help who just taking advantage of us? What if there are people who do not belong here? Who are not like us? Who do not think and believe like we do? Why do we keep doing this?" We do it because there are a whole lot of people out there who do not know that they are accepted by God. Some don't know because over time they have been told that they have been rejected by a church, that they have been rejected by Christ, that they are not welcome if they do not act properly, if they do not dress and think properly. I know children who have been told by a pastor that it makes Jesus mad, makes him angry if they are not dressed just right. These are people who have been accepted by God. The Lord is looking to touch them, to heal them. And if we are to be God's representatives in the world, we need not only to accept them when they come, but to invite them into our presence, and then to keep inviting them until they show up.

We are the people of God. We are the body of Christ. We can make a difference just by hearing and caring; by listening and loving. We can make a difference just by doing what we can do. We can heal the loneliness that many feel by calling and visiting. We can heal the emptiness of hunger by offering out of our abundance. We can heal the chill that comes from a cold, uncaring world by offering warm garments and an even warmer love. We can help heal our abused friends and neighbors by offering a safe haven where people are wanted, and loved, and accepted. Though the world rejects them, we can accept them. We can make the world a better place by loving others as God has loved us, by reaching out and doing what we can do. I do not call for political investment, but personal involvement. Doing what we are capable of doing out of love for God. That is how we give thanks to God.

There is one more thing we need to do. We need to offer Christ. Not long ago I was told about two drug treatment centers. Though both had very similar programs the one had a much better success rate. The difference was that one program offered Christ. It is Christ who makes the difference in our lives. It is Christ who makes a difference in the world.

Many people believe they have no place to go, that no one will listen to them, that no one will help them. Some are trapped in poverty, in the ghettos and barrios. Some are trapped in situations of abuse. Others in prisons of addiction. Some are trapped in political systems. Though the prisons are often different, a common characteristic is that hope is torn away, that the pain and hostility of desperation continually grows. While searching for an escape from one trap many people try another way, any other way, and that often leads them to even more desperate circumstances. There is no where to go to find acceptance; to find healing; to find hope; to find love. There is no way that they are ready to thank God for these hostile circumstances in their lives. To these people we must offer Christ. To these people we must take the gospel, a message of hope. We must talk to them and let them know the difference Christ makes in our lives. We must show these people the love that Christ shows us, and to do that we must reach out in faith. We must walk in faith. We must give of ourselves, our goods, our time, given in faith so those who have been rejected by this world will know that they are accepted by God.

It is not hard to see the sad stories, the stories of people who have been rejected, the stories of those who have no place to go. It is not hard to find people who can find little reason to give thanks in this season. But that Samaritan did find someone who accepted him. And the one who reached out to that Samaritan is the same one who has reached out to us, to heal us and accept us, the one who has made a difference in our lives. Now it is our turn to return to the side of Jesus that we might give thanks. And if we really want to do that, we can't do it here. And chances are we can't do it in our homes on Thursday.

If we really want to give thanks to God, we do it by offering to the world the same sweet goodness that Christ has given us: a message of hope and grace; an attitude of joy and peace; an acceptance of each child of God by offering the bread of heaven to feed the soul and the goods of the earth to nurture and strengthen the body. Then when we return to Jesus it will not just be one of us, but the multitude of all who have experienced the healing that comes when we've been touched by our Lord, Jesus Christ.

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Today may you go forth in the real spirit of thanksgiving. May you go forth to praise God by sharing the grace and the goodness, the healing and the wholeness that we have, only because God accepted us, because God loves us. Now let us share all we have received so that everyone might know that even though the world may have rejected them, they are loved and accepted by us, and they are loved and accepted by God. In your life may it be so. And in your world may you make it so. Amen.