

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel for the Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost, October 24, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

WRONG—for all the right reasons

Jesus, I think we would all agree, could be described as single-minded. We remember that, even as a child, when he was being scolded for wandering off to the Temple to engage the religious authorities in a little impromptu theological debate, he reminded his parents that he had to be **“about my father’s business.”** When, later on, his followers tried to get him to slow down and spend some “quality time” with his own family and friends, he pointed out that these crowds of the poor, oppressed, and desperate WERE his family. Still later on, when he announced that he intended to head right into the teeth of his opposition, to face those who hated him most, the disciples tried unsuccessfully to talk him out of going into the city of Jerusalem. Jesus, however, is clear that this confrontation is exactly why he came in the first place.

So we might well ask ourselves: What **is** the “father’s business?” Who are the people who are truly the family of Jesus—the ones to whom he came? What did Jesus come here to do, anyway? I want to suggest to you this morning that the answer to all these questions is the **same**—ONE fairly direct and simple answer that can clarify for us who Jesus is, why he came to live among us, and what he did for us in the process.

Let me begin by offering you a few thoughts about the way I am convinced most folks think about religion. I’m talking here about religion-in-general, not Christianity in particular. My observation is that religion has (since the beginning of that time when man’s brain could function at a level somewhat higher than mere reptilian fight-or-flight response) consisted of sacrificial magic. What I mean is that human beings have throughout the ages come up with elaborate systems of ritual incantation, symbolic gift-giving, or improved personal and social moral conduct, all aimed at trying to influence God to grant them “the good things of life.” The idea was that if we said the right words, burnt the best livestock on God’s altar, or promised to behave ourselves better then God would be really impressed. God would reward those religious efforts with better crops, less taxes, victory over our enemies, and more boy babies to work the fields. In short, the business of religion has been the creation of guilt and groveling attitudes, appeasement of anger, and manipulation through psychological self-deception. What it all boils down to is that we’re expected to admit that we are, in God’s eyes, evil-doers—bad little children at whom God has every right to be angry and disappointed. In that view, God is perceived as a more or less angry judge whose unruly kids have rebelled and who have to be “gotten back into line.” So, religion exists to help us deal with the justified grievance that God has against all of us—to show us ways that, if we “straighten up and fly right,” maybe God will come around to liking us again.

Now, over against that GRIEVANCE notion of what religion is all about. Let me come back to our original set of questions about who Jesus is, why he came, and what he accomplished in the process. Put as simply and directly as I know how, let me just tell you flat-out that Jesus came to tell us and to show us that everything I’ve just said about religion simply **ISN’T SO**. What Jesus went on about is that, even though God certainly COULD justifiably feel angry, certainly COULD have a grievance against all of us, GOD DOESN’T! God, Jesus tells us, is far less like an angry judge than like a loving father who, however disappointed, never stops loving his children deeply, personally, and profoundly—no matter what! We heard the same point being made in today’s Gospel reading (Luke 18:9-14)—the story of two very different people who went to pray;

one who was proud of himself. He believed he had done all the right things to work off his offenses against God. He thought he had “money in the bank” salvation-wise. The other simply offered thanks for all the blessings and mercy he had experienced. The first man was working out his grievance theory; the other was praising God for loving him no matter what. The first was a creature of his own times—doing what he thought he was supposed to. But he was **wrong**—wrong, ironically, for what he thought were all the right reasons!

When Jesus talks about being “about the father’s business” he’s talking about getting rid of the old ideas about religion, about replacing false notions of fear with a whole new concept that liberates us from such childish understandings of God. Jesus wants us to understand that God does not hate us, that God is not angry or hostile, and that God doesn’t want to “get even.” Jesus tells us and shows us that what God is after is our trust, our love, our honesty, our humility, our compassion. The “business of the father” is that Jesus came among us to be an agent of peace and reconciliation—to do away completely with the old and wrong-headed ideas of God that have kept us separated over the centuries.

Those to whom Jesus came with this astonishing message of liberation are those in every generation who as he put it “have ears to hear.” The family of Jesus is not limited to any race, or nation, or ecclesiastical organization. The message of Jesus is a message that is addressed to each individual person and it has to be told and retold. The old grievance notion of religion appears to be a built-in flaw that we’re born with and which is nurtured by society and, yes, perpetuated, I’m sorry to admit, by the Church itself. The Church still hangs on to grievance theology, actually undoing the work that Jesus came to do. Sunday after Sunday, in churches all over the world the Church goes on and on about sacrifice, atoning blood sacrifice, and moral rearmament. While it’s true that “Jesus died for our sins” that cruel death was not some sort of a fine or a payment imposed by God. It wasn’t God’s way of “evening the score.” Jesus laid down his life for one reason only—so that you might know the unbelievable depth of God’s love and mercy. But that message of love continues to be clouded in our minds because of conflicting signals that just don’t make any sense. We still hear talk about God punishing gay people; God causing natural disasters because, supposedly, we haven’t been “religious” enough. We continue to offer a worn out religious tradition of “right thinking,” “reformed lives,” and “good works” as if by a more modern psychological magic we human beings could bridge the gap of separation from God which we ourselves have created. The reason all that is totally wrong is because the Good News of Jesus is not about US—it’s about what God is doing with and for us.

Jesus came among us to tell us and show us that the amazing grace of God has set us free. That’s the message that we need to share with each other and with the children of our Sunday School. We need to stop promoting the bad Old News of religion-in-general and start being more faithful to the Good News that Jesus offers us instead—the Good News that God has no grievance toward us. God isn’t like us. God is pure love and pure love doesn’t hold grudges. God’s love is too big to have a grudge in the first place. God wants your trust, your compassion for others, and for you to be liberated from all fear and misunderstanding. God isn’t interested in your guilt or settling some non-existent grievance. God is looking for folks like the humble man who was praying in the Temple—people who love God deeply and just want to become part of the family of Jesus. That’s it in a nutshell—the whole point of all this: God’s not mad. God just wants your release from guilt and fear. All God seeks in return is your THANKS. How about helping to spread that word?