

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 27, 2011 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Living as Children of the Most High

When you were a little kid, if you're like most of us here, you were taken each week to "Sunday School." Every Sunday morning, without fail, you had been scrubbed in the bath, dressed up in fancy clothes that were stiff and uncomfortable, scooped up in the family car, and driven off to Church. Once you got there you found yourself in a room with a bunch of other kids that you never saw except on Sundays in a room full of pictures that probably showed sheep, tents, and all sorts of people dressed in what looked like bathrobes. During the next hour or so there were an adult or two who told Bible stories and talked a lot about "What would Jesus do?" Jesus was constantly held up as the model. The pictures showed Jesus as a gentle, loving guy who wouldn't hurt a fly. The message always seemed to be that you should be nice to others, always mind your parents, and don't hit your little brothers and sisters.

Now, I'm sure there's a lot to be said for that sort of childhood Sunday School learning. It probably goes a long way toward explaining why most of us turn out to be reasonably civilized and why we're not in prison. But, the problem with all that is that we wind up having a picture of Jesus that simply doesn't square at all with the facts. "Sweet Jesus meek and mild" is NOT an accurate picture of the Jesus that we as adults encounter in the pages of the New Testament. The biblical Jesus is ANYTHING BUT gentle and harmless.

Jesus, in fact, got into a lot of trouble. He got into trouble because of what he did and because of what he said. It wasn't that he did things that were destructive of property or that in any way risked the life of another. What got Jesus into trouble was that he hung around with what we would think of as the "wrong kind of people." Jesus didn't behave himself like a preacher should. Jesus made people mad and, eventually the so-called "good" people rose up and killed him. That, of course, is exactly what this Church season of Epiphany is all about. It gradually reveals how the innocence of the baby in the manger gave way to the confrontational leader of an anti-establishment movement that confronted and changed the whole world. By both what he had to say and the way he lived his life, Jesus was constantly getting cross-ways of mainstream people.

In the Gospel reading for this morning (Matthew 6:24-34), just as an example, Jesus is speaking to a crowd of people who sincerely want to understand how best to obey the rules and to "get right with God." The advice that Jesus offers is not the usual set of religious platitudes. It's not a standard harmless Sunday School lesson. Instead it's a revolutionary notion that turns everything upside down. In his view, life is all about human beings behaving in a God-like way. Jesus challenges them to reject the traditional view of justice as "an eye for an eye" in favor of a standard of total forgiveness. He tells them that the poor aren't having a tough time—as they have always assumed—because they are living under God's judgment. Jesus tells them that real freedom involves letting go of the trappings of success and wealth. Jesus says that life is not about achieving things nearly so much as it is recognizing that all you are and all you have is a generously free gift from God. The idea is to live gratefully and graciously as "children of the Most High." Jesus tells them that the answer to their question about how to best serve God is to be LIKE God: "Be merciful as your Father is merciful. Do not judge and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you...A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for THE MEASURE YOU GIVE WILL BE THE MEASURE YOU GET BACK."

Jesus, himself, clearly sought to live a life governed by exactly those standards. When he did that, it got him into even more trouble than when he talked about it. Most of us would agree, I think, with the feeling that religious leaders ought to hold pretty conventional views of life and live in a way that's beyond any moral reproach. We would like to think that our Minister, Priest, or Rabbi behaves himself or herself in a way that doesn't bring disgrace or ill will down on the church because of public judgment. Preachers shouldn't curse, and drink, and tell off-color stories. We imagine our religious leaders being friends with upstanding, respected members of society. Well, according to the bible, it was precisely because Jesus didn't live up to that set of characteristics that he was constantly getting into trouble.

Critics of Jesus—and even his own followers—were shocked that he spent most of his time with very questionable characters—individuals who were seen as having low moral standards and people who were not exactly active in the life of their local synagogue. The everyday friends of Jesus were, in fact, social outcasts—people who were labeled “sinners”—thieves, prostitutes, lazy uneducated fishermen, and shady business characters who had a hard time even keeping a job. In short, Jesus hung around with people who weren't very “mainstream” in their talking, their personal hygiene, and even what they ate. They were, you might say, “Not our type.”

Now all that would have been plenty, in the days in which Jesus lived, to have gotten him in trouble but that's not even the half of the story. What got Jesus into real DEEP trouble was what he had to say when someone spoke up and asked him to tell them what God is like. Then, the “fat was really in the fire.”

Jesus seldom talked about God except in the form of stories. His stories were seemingly simple little anecdotes in which the main character was God—what God is like or how things will change when God is fully in charge of this world. The story that he seemed to offer most in response to those who questioned his judgment in terms of the people God chooses to hold up as good examples is the very familiar story we've come to know as “The Prodigal Son.” In this story, Jesus tries to show that if we human beings are going to try to be GOD-LIKE in our dealings with other people then we're going to have to take a new look at all those who we want to reject and cast out. The story has to do with a father who has two sons. One of them is, seemingly, hard-working, thrifty, disciplined, obedient—a worthy heir to his father's fortune—someone that every Sunday School child ought to admire and emulate. The other son was careless, short-sighted, self-indulgent, disloyal—a kid who would break any parent's heart. For typical Sunday School graduates, the first would meet the standards to be one of OUR SORT and the other was definitely NOT. If this story were going to be told in Sunday School we would assume that the moral is clear: you need to be like the good son; not like the bad one.

But here's the surprising thing! In the story as it was told by Jesus, a whole lot more attention is paid to the bad guy. The elder brother gets a not very complimentary walk-on-and-walk-off-in-a-huff part right in the last scene; just a tiny “bit part.” The younger brother, the one we would tend to dismiss as not worth bothering about, actually co-stars with the father. It's a shocking story that absolutely reverses our expectations. What we learn is that the stern father, the representation of the same God who delivered to us the Ten Commandments, gives **everything** to that wayward son who seems to us so worthless.

In fairness, the father loves both of his sons, loves them equally. But because the younger one is more confused and unfocused he pays more attention to him. The father is broken-hearted at the younger son's wastefulness and lack of sound judgment but, more importantly, he hopes that eventually—in spite of all his troubles and mistakes—he will find the real purpose of life. When that young man does find his way back to a

life of responsibility; to a place where he was truly loved, the father has been longing and watching for his return all along. It's a though he were missing-in-action, feared dead, but suddenly discovered to be alive and well. The father is so happy that he calls for a party. The son is not treated on the basis of what he's said or done, but on the basis of who he IS—the child who is loved by his father. And the father is consistent. He treats the elder brother exactly the same. He loves the older one and wants for him only the very best—only the older brother just can't see it. This older son is angry and resentful. He describes his entire life up to this point as SLAVING. He rejects the younger brother and wants the father to disinherit him completely. So, in this Tale of Two Brothers, Jesus shows us a very strange outcome: the apparently dishonorable brother enjoying a party in his honor while the apparently “perfect” elder brother who has never done anything wrong his entire life is, by his own choice, gets left out in the cold.

Do you see what's happening here? Jesus has gone behind the question of who DESERVES in order to look at the more important consideration of who BELONGS.

He wants us to understand that, in God's eyes, we are all beloved children of our Creator—a God who wills, and works, and waits for each one of us to recognize WHOSE we are and to “come to ourselves” just as the younger brother does in the story. Jesus is trying to get us to see that God wants our goodness to find its basis not on some puritanical set of rules, good manners, or fear of consequences. God wants us to live a life filled with gratitude and appreciation for all that we have been **given**—not because we earned it; not because we deserved it—but because God LOVES us.

The elder brother in the story of Jesus is like so many seemingly religious people. He has tried to win approval by adopting outward obedience but, in his heart, remaining increasingly resentful and isolated. He has become alienated from the very father whose love gave him every privilege that he has enjoyed throughout his entire life. His life has been a sham and a burden of hypocrisy. He stands unmasked at the end of the story not as the “good guy” but rather the tragic “bad guy.”

Well, I started out saying that Jesus was constantly getting himself in trouble both by what he did and what he said. Here we have a perfect example of that. The picture of God that Jesus painted could not have been more diametrically opposed to the one held by his critics. The picture that Jesus painted was completely subversive. Unlike his critics, Jesus is not seeking to bless the current attitudes of society; he's trying to announce a new way of thinking altogether. St. Paul refers to the teachings of Jesus as the creation of a whole “new order” of things. What we see here, and throughout the rest of the New Testament, is that Jesus got himself into trouble by telling the Truth—a Truth that was bound to upset those who were comfortable and in command of the existing order of things.

Which brings us to the really interesting point of everything I've been talking about: Epiphany Season, with its picture of the way Jesus confronts the powers of his day with God's Truth leads us, in the next couple of weeks, directly to the Season of Lent. The story of Jesus and his death on the cross has exactly the same impact on the smugly self-righteous people of his time as the younger brother's return home had on his elder brother. In the end, the elder brother is exposed, unmasked as the REAL “bad guy.” By the rejection and execution of Jesus, the very people who were so respected and admired by the world—Rabbis, scribes, Pharisees, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphus, the Sanhedren, the Roman puppet government, the whole elder brother society found themselves embarrassingly exposed as the “bad guys.”

No wonder Jesus got himself in trouble.