

GOOD ENOUGH FOR GOD

Preached by Douglas Norris in the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto,
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Colossians 1:19-29

The "angry ones" is what Eleanor Armstrong named the elementary school children in the poverty stricken area of Appalachia. She had gone there to set up an art program in the school and was given classes totaling 600 children. She knew that the children were poor, and gradually came to learn what that word means: Poor are children who put on winter clothes in October and didn't take them off until April; Poor are children who fought each other for old car seats that served as beds in their house; Poor is the girl who told her proudly, "I get the blanket when Ma don't come home."

But, the children themselves, she called "the angry ones." They were belligerent, restless, and seething with anger. She couldn't keep their attention very long at one time. The anger wasn't directed at her personally; it usually turned on one another with scuffles, kicks, stealing, destructiveness, and foul language.

Through her art work with them, she really got an insight into their personalities. She assigned them once to draw pictures called "My Family." About one-fourth of them showed a family with two adult figures, several smaller figures, and some pets. But the rest either had no father figure at all, or he was a tiny figure at the bottom of the page. Often neither parent was shown. She gradually realized what the cold statistics meant on their cards: father unknown, mother in jail, mother an alcoholic, etc. And, Eleanor Armstrong wrote, "Inevitably, the child artist had drawn him/herself standing alone, as far away from the other figures as the little piece of paper would allow." Alone, separated, alienated.

These angry Appalachian children were illustrating the biblical description of the human situation: separation from God, separation from one another, separation from one's true self. Paul, in the letter to Colossians, in our text today, wrote in 1:21, "And you once were estranged, hostile in mind, doing evil deeds."

We're continuing today a series of sermons on Colossians. Paul wrote to the church because they were being tempted to follow a cult which compromised their faith, the faith they were taught, the faith to which they had first responded when they had become Christians. Paul begins at the beginning in this letter which makes it quite appropriate for us to study as we begin our ministry together. In last week's sermon, we began with Jesus Christ, whom Paul called "The Beginning". Now today we look at the major task of God, we look at what God was and is doing through Jesus Christ.

God not only created all things through Christ and for Christ, which was the material for last week's sermon; God redeems all things through Christ. Our text today is Colossians 1:21, "And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, Christ has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death (making peace by the blood of the cross, vs. 20), in order to present you holy and blameless and ir-reproachable before God."

One of the results of finding ourselves in the human situation - alienation, separation, that is, sin - is the desperate longing to belong. Most would do anything to feel as if they fit, they had a place, they were accepted. Most desperately yearn to be good enough, good enough to be noticed, to be wanted; good enough for God to love; good enough for heaven.

How do you find a sense of belonging? How do you become good enough? How is alienation, estrangement, hostility, sin overcome? The good news of our gospel, the good news Paul was writing to the Colossians, is that it is not a matter of trying hard enough - not a self-help improvement program. The Colossians, at least some of

them, were obeying a strict code, trying to follow all the rules of the popular cult, as if obeying rules makes one good enough. The Colossians, in following the cult, practiced a rigid behavioral code; as if living a good life makes one good enough. They were attracted by secret traditions, as if knowing secrets which other people didn't know would make them good enough. And, Paul emphatically, wrote throughout all his letters: hey, you do not make yourself good enough. You are good enough. You are redeemed. You are made right with God, with others, and with yourself, because of God's grace, God's love for you. It is not your doing!

Why is it so difficult for church people especially to understand the gospel. God redeems us through Jesus Christ. Christ has reconciled us to God, made us good enough for God, through his death, through the cross. Why is that so difficult to understand? Yet church members struggle, strive painfully, and often make it painful for those around them when they try to be so righteous, to be good enough. Before I left Modesto, I called on one of the dear old ladies of the church. She is in a guest room and was recently told by the doctor that she had a tumor, that it was malignant, and terminal. We discussed the fact that her husband and son have preceded her in death, and she sorely misses them both. So I said to her, "And you are ready to go, ready to die, ready for heaven." She said, "Oh, yes. I've tried to live a good life; I've not hurt people." I responded, "It's not a matter of trying. Eternal life is a gift from God. It's a matter of God's grace, of God's love for you, not a matter of trying to live a good life." Oh, the nervousness of it all! The anxiety of wondering if you're good enough! The woman had lived her entire life in the church, and still could not grasp the gospel! That is why Paul's letter to the Colossians is so relevant to us today. Redemption is God's act, done through Jesus Christ.

William Barclay in his commentary on Colossians writes, "The New Testament never talks of God being reconciled to people, but of people being reconciled to God." It is not a matter of trying to prove you are good enough to God. It is not a matter of meeting God with the results of your life in your hands, pleading, "Oh, God, is it good enough to be rewarded?" Like a child, "Mommy, I've made my bed; now may I live in the family?" "I've done it as best I could; now, Mommy, will you love me?" Love is a gift. Heaven is a gift. Salvation is a gift. We do not make ourselves presentable to God. God is not removed from us; we are removed from God.

Jesus has built the bridge that unites us with God. The chasm has been bridged. The barrier has been overcome. How? Not by changing God, but by changing us. Jesus did not change God's attitude. God was always like Jesus. It was God who sent Jesus. It is God's love that initiated the process of redemption. The death of Jesus, the sacrifice of Jesus of his life on the cross, is the means of reconciliation, changing not God, but us. Through the death of Jesus, God is saying to you and me, "I love you like that. I love you enough to see my Son suffer and die for you. I love you enough to bear the cross on my heart." The cross is the proof that there is no length to which the love of God will refuse to go, in order to convince you of our sin, and cause you to turn to him in commitment, to receive the gift.

For our response to the love of God in Christ; our response to the reconciliation for which Jesus gladly died; our response is to stop trying to be good enough for God by and in ourselves and turn our lives over to God who remakes us into the likeness for which we were created; namely, Jesus Christ.

In this passage, Paul explains the purpose of God's redemption, in and through Jesus Christ. 1:22, "In order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before God." The aim of reconciliation is holiness. Living in Christ is the goal, and this will be continued in subsequent sermons as we work our way further into Colossians.

How God's heart aches with grief over the separation which exists between God and people, the alienation between people, the estrangement inside you separating you from your best self. God yearns for our redemption, for the separation to be overcome, and has provided the means, namely, his love. The love God has for you has been revealed in Christ, and the power to make that love real, has been shown in Christ. You are good enough for God, not in your own doing, but because God loves you. Relax. Trust. Enjoy what God has done for you.

Eleanor Armstrong in Appalachia, working with the angry children, discovered again the power of the gospel. One room in particular was hostile, with an undercurrent of jeering anger. One day she prayed in earnest for God to help her reach the children, and God answered her by telling her, "Look for me in the classroom; look into the children's eyes and you will see me. And when you see me, call me by name. Talk about me."

The next day she went into the classroom with trepidation, but with faith. The children were more restless than usual. She had with her a set of prints that cost her an entire week's salary. A tall boy named Johnny grabbed them and with a ruler slashed the first picture in half. She wondered if she could see Jesus in Johnny. As she looked in his eyes she saw strength, for nobody picked on Johnny. She felt that in his strength, Johnny was like Christ. He was strong like Jesus. As she looked at Johnny, he lay down his ruler and walked to his seat.

She walked the aisles, just looking at the children. She looked at one girl whose mother had taught her to steal. While the mother pretended to faint, the children would fill sacks with the merchandise. The girl had been put into a county home where she had been whipped, lectured, and locked up; but she had never changed and she had never cried. The teacher, Eleanor, thought as she looked at the girl, "Why, she is like Jesus who also could not be frightened and who would not give up."

By the time the teacher had walked around the room, it was as still as a church. She had not yet said a word until she softly said, "Jesus is here." And she whispered, "Jesus loves you. Jesus cares for you." In the stillness, the shoplifter who had never cried began to weep. The tall, strong Johnny began to sob. Eleanor Armstrong wrote that the children did change, that her teaching took on new meaning as it never had before, that the children settled down, and found the love of Christ, the redemption of God.

That is the gospel. May I say it again. As we begin this ministry together, let us build on the gospel. Hear it again. Listen as you have rarely listened. Clear out the cobwebs. Clear away the misconceptions, for Jesus loves you. Jesus is here.

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