

Proper 17B – God is near to us

1. For the past several weeks I have been talking about the world's, and more specifically the church's, decreasing knowledge of the Word
 - a. With the rise of secularism and the decline in Church commitment have come several trends
 - i. A couple of weeks ago we talked about the increased acceptance of false teaching or "another Gospel" as Paul calls in Ephesians
 - ii. That's made possible because of widespread ignorance of the Word and what it really says and our unwillingness to hold to the "hard sayings of Christ" the ones that are unpopular and get us into uncomfortable conversations if we mention them.
 - iii. Like our Lord's claim that He is, "**the Way, the Truth, and the Life and nobody comes to the Father *except* through me,**" (John 14).
 - iv. Just this week there is another study done by Probe Ministries in its Religious Views & Practices Survey showed, "More than 60% of born-again Christians in America between the ages of 18 and 39 believe that Buddha, Muhammad and Jesus are all valid paths to salvation and over 30% say they either believe that Jesus sinned just like other people when He lived on Earth or aren't sure..."ⁱ
 - b. Last week we saw that there is an inverse relationship between knowledge of the Word of God and commitment to man-made tradition
 - i. As knowledge of what the Word really says or requires decreases people are inclined to substitute human tradition for God's truth.
 - ii. Tradition should be a vehicle to increase knowledge of the Word not obscure or replace it.
 - c. Why are times so difficult and knowledge of the Word always so tenuous?
 - i. It's not by accident and it's not only because we are fallen creatures who have difficulty clinging to the Word
 - ii. Our ignorance and rebellion are also the result of purposeful, behind the scenes action – we are pawns in the battle between the forces of God and the forces of evil.
 - iii. That's what Paul tells us in our Epistle lesson today, "**For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.**" (Ephesians 6:12)
 - iv. And that battle for your soul is won or lost by what you think of God: one of the enemy's greatest weapons is to make you think that God is distant, unconcerned, and difficult to approach except through a lot of work.

2. But our OT and Gospel lessons reveal just the opposite that God is very near to us, that He is concerned about us that *He* is the One who comes to us not us to Him and we are the ones who then bring God into the world.
 - a. Our OT lesson takes place as the children of Israel are about to enter the Holy Land after 40 years in the desert after they were delivered out of Egypt
 - i. And we hear Moses say, **“For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us...?”** (Dt 4:7)
 - ii. Moses was reminding the Israelites that God is not a God who is far away but very near to His people, that God initiated the relationship they didn’t have to find Him.
 - iii. God always makes the first move toward us; it has been that way since the moment we fell into sin in the Garden, God took the initiative to right what we wronged to restore what we broke and He was going to do it Himself.
 - iv. As He promised Adam and Eve in the Garden when He cursed the serpent who tempted them, **“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”** (Gen 3:15) – the first promise of a Savior who would destroy Satan and restore creation.
 - b. In the intervening centuries, before that seed of the woman was born, God made a way that He could be among them.
 - i. Yes, it was regulated by rules and traditions and ceremonies all of which made it safe for an unholy people to be in the presence of a holy God – they were for their protection.
 - ii. That’s the Law and the commandments that Moses told the Israelites about in our reading, rules that Israel would live by until the coming Messiah
 - iii. But they were temporary, always pointing forward to the time when they would not be needed when the seed of the woman would come.
 - iv. As Paul told us last week in Col, **“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”** (Col 2:16-17)
 - v. Or as he says in Gal., **“Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made...So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.”** (Gal 3:19,24)
 - c. That’s what we see in the Gospel, the Lord had come to put an end to the Law with all of its regulations for how to approach God

- i. God had come to us in the incarnation, that's where we get one of the Names for Jesus – Immanuel God with us, to restore a proper relationship not governed by ritual or rules
 - ii. In our Gospel lesson, the dietary restrictions given by Moses in Exodus and Deut had been binding on Israel, without exception since they were given
 - iii. Now our Lord says, **“There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him...Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)** (Mk 7:15,18-19)
 - iv. No good Jew, certainly no rabbi, speaking on their own authority would have made such a statement but Christ had come to define a new relationship not based on rules but on faith.
 - d. But the enemy always takes what God intended for good and twists to his own purposes to obscure God's Word.
 - i. It all goes back to the question he asked Eve when he tempted her at the tree, **“Did God really say?”** (Gen 3:1)
 - ii. If Satan can replace God's Word with anything else, he wins the battle
 - iii. That's why we've been saying for the past couple of weeks that knowledge of and commitment to the Word of God is so vitally important for the church – it is our protection from being deceived by Satan schemes.
- 3. To the sinful human mind, it makes sense that an all-holy God separates Himself from the likes of us, and is approached by complex rituals and arcane knowledge
 - a. But as Paul tells us in Rom 5, **“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** (Rom 5:8)
 - i. What that means is that while we were still wallowing in our sin Christ came to us, He didn't wait for us to come to Him because we never would have
 - ii. The incarnation is all about God dwelling with His people to restore the face-to-face relationship we were originally created to have.
 - iii. That Christ, God with us, took our sin, our shame, our guilt on Himself as our substitute and died on the cross so that He would interact with us through faith and love and not by rules and rituals.
 - b. And just as Christ in God incarnate, God in flesh, we as His disciples are called to “incarnate” Christ to the rest of the world
 - i. To make known through our words and actions that we do not have a God who is far away and unapproachable to all but a few, but rather a God who is very near as Moses said in our OT lesson.

- ii. A God who came at the cost of His own life to restore a relationship with each one of us through the forgiveness of our sin so that we could find others with whom to share the Good News of that God wants that same kind of relationship with them.

ⁱ <https://www.christianpost.com/news/60-of-young-adults-say-jesus-isnt-the-only-way-to-salvation.html>