

St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church

**Sermon for Lent II
February 28, 2010**

Scriptures: Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17 – 4:1; Luke 13: 31-35

As we think more about this season of Lent, the apostle Paul presents us with an image this morning that is compelling and instructive. In our Philippians scripture he calls us to citizenship in a kingdom that God creates in us and all around us --- a kingdom that engages us with Him as our creator and sustainer.

Then we come to Luke chapter 13 and read those words of Jesus to the Pharisees. Now, the Pharisees get a pretty bad rap throughout scripture. So often we read about the Pharisees and can't believe that anyone ever really lived with such a narrow, legalistic, misguided perspective. This time, however, we learn that the Pharisees are actually on Jesus's side, as they warn him about Herod's plan to kill Him. That's a whole 'nother sermon, though -- one we will examine another day.

For now, think "citizenship" as we read again how Jesus admonished the people of Jerusalem in Luke:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, but you were not willing.

Jesus longed to build a kingdom

- **in which God and His love are the cornerstones of everyone's day**
- **a kingdom where relationships are based on giving more than taking**
- **a kingdom where God speaks to open hearts and pries open those that would be closed to His voice.**

But what if the scripture read THIS way instead?

O Ooltewah, Ooltewah, you who are so busy taking care of success and prosperity and self-preservation --- you who have forgotten how I am eager to speak to your INNER world, your hearts, your souls. I long to engage with you, to show you a higher purpose for your lives, to sustain you as you live together out of your souls, the souls I created to be my dwelling place within each of you. O Ooltewah, Ooltewah, I long to draw you to me! O Ooltewah, Ooltewah, I love you as my people, and I long to be your God!

Chattanooga's own King Oehmig writes that the people of Jerusalem had become consumed by the fear that they were at risk of losing what they already had. That becoming citizens of God's kingdom would mean they would have to relinquish control of their lives and take a chance that everything they had built --- gardens and fortresses and amphitheatres and a city full of pleasures and opportunities and conveniences --- everything might be lost to an unseen, unknown God. So, Oehmig says, they became self-protective, trusting in a world they could see and build and control.

Sound familiar?

It's just so easy for us to slip into a pattern of praying for the best deal we can get from God. And that deal usually about OUR security and OUR successes --- about getting God to take care of us and the things WE want in life.

In trying to sort out what we should be praying for and this whole citizenship thing, I turn to one of my favorite Christian authors, Gordon McDonald, who was our minister when we lived in Boston while I was in graduate school. In his book, The Life God Blesses, Gordon tells the true story of Michael Plant, a popular American yachtsman who set out in 1992 to cross the North Atlantic Ocean solo. He had spent untold resources on his sailboat, the Coyote. It was a state-of-the-art craft, equipped with all modern technological equipment. Plant had spent uncommon efforts on planning a successful journey, focusing great resources on making the Coyote waterproof and seaworthy. He had put enormous energy into thinking of every possible scenario and every possible safety detail. He was so secure in his planning that all he had to do was get in the boat one morning, be vigilant for the next month or so, and successfully wake up on a distant shore as a decorated hero. In other words, he was so focused on OUTER success that he didn't take time

to strengthen the INNER needs of his soul. And the journey he was about to take was a journey of both body AND soul, just like the journey you and I take every day.

So he set out heading eastward. The sailing world was stunned when it was reported on the 11th day of Plant's journey that signals tracking the Coyote were lost. A search party commenced what they thought would be a rescue effort. Several days later the Coyote was found, but there was no trace of Michael Plant. His life raft was located in the cabin un-inflated. Most disturbing, though, was that the Coyote was discovered UPSIDE DOWN in the water!

Now, I am not a seasoned sailor, but even I know that the physics of properly constructed sailboats prevent one from capsizing, even if it were to lean too far to one side. No doubt, you have seen films of sailors leaning way out on the side of a sleek sailboat, working hard to keep the craft upright in a strong wind. They are able to do that and the boat will stay upright because in the world of sailboats there is a fundamental, failsafe principle at work:

THERE MUST BE MORE WEIGHT BELOW THE WATERLINE THAN ABOVE IT.

For the Coyote, an 8000 pound ballast had been built in the keel to assure that the boat could withstand any threatening wind or wave. But when the Coast Guard finally found the Coyote, its 8000 pound ballast had mysteriously broken away from the keel.

Gordon McDonald goes on to write that

- when we work harder to take care of what he calls our “outer space,” --- or our visible, outer world --- than we do to nourish the inner part of our spiritual geography
- when our focus is skewed toward a priority of taking care of our outer lives to help ensure our security and successes
- when we ignore or become complacent about protecting and developing our souls,

Then we are vulnerable to the forces of the world. In short, it is a recipe for temporary success perhaps, but ultimately it is self-destruction. And, McDonald concludes, our only hope for real, lasting happiness in God's

kingdom is to exercise and cultivate that quiet part of our lives where God connects with us.

And where is that quiet part of our lives? It is in

- in prayer and dialogue with heaven itself,
- in our intentional times when we carve out of our day some space for reading and meditation and listening,
- in the difficult but necessary moments of repentance and confession,
- in moments of praise and worship right here and every day, as we invite God to soak deeply into our hearts.

It's about discovering and feeding that quiet part of ourselves where

- we no longer have to be competitive,
- where we don't have to be #1
- where we don't have to always be RIGHT.

There's lots of room for others in that world, and you and I can give ourselves permission to dwell in a world where we can feel God feeding our needs, helping us to feed others' needs, and --- here's the good part --- we don't have to be in control. We don't even have to be in charge!

That's what Lent is about, isn't it? It's that time of year when we prepare our souls to receive our God and to let Him invade our inner spaces, to let Him nourish and develop our hearts to take on the mantel of citizenship in His Kingdom.

Perhaps you have already made a decision about observing Lent. If so, I know you will be blessed by that choice. If not, it's not too late to let our hearts receive the Good News, to be quiet, to be receptive, to give ourselves permission to receive the greatest gift of all --- God's grace.

Lent is more than a time when we continue business as usual and develop our OUTER worlds. It is about allowing God to strengthen our spiritual geography **BELOW THE WATERLINE**.

AMEN