

## **Sermon for September 6, 2009: the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Do you ever read John Rosemond, the child-rearing expert, in the Index-Journal on Saturdays?

I like to read him, even if I do not always agree.

He is a cranky contrarian, sure that by age two your children should be pottin'g trained, sitting quietly in church taking in the sermon, and eating the exact same supper you eat, without any concessions to their little palates or short attention spans.

In a recent article, he argued that one of the most important things parents should do is to support a child's teacher when a child begins to complain.

Say your child gets a "B," when the child and you both think her work merited an "A."

Rosemond says you should take the teacher's side in the debate, for this reason.

It is an opportunity to teach your child a most important lesson; that life is unfair; that bad things happen to good people; and then that adversity is real and must be met with renewed energy, hope, and determination.

I think we all know that bad things happen to good people, a tough lesson we learn early in life.

We would like for it to be otherwise, for the universe to be as clear as it is for the small child who has not yet learned the world's unfairness, who imagines that Mommy and Daddy can continually make all things well.

Some would call that a hope for a morally-consistent universe, which works like this:

You do well; good things happen. You do bad; bad things happen.

We hear the hope for a universe like that named in Psalm 125

Those who trust in the Lord stand fast and strong forever.

The wicked are not permitted to rule over the good.

Indeed, those who walk in crooked ways are led away; they disappear from the scene.

That hope for a morally-consistent universe is present in the lesson from Proverbs as well.

Those who sow injustice reap calamity; those who are generous are blessed.

We wish it were so, but it is not.

The wicked and innocent suffer alike and flourish alike.

Bad things happen to good people.

That may sound like bad news at first; we all think we are pretty good people and ought not encounter the sorrow we inevitably face.

I don't want to encourage low self-esteem or an excessively dim view of human nature, but if we are in touch with our fallen-ness, our inevitable sin-sickness, then another way of speaking about the universe opens up to us.

Bad things happen to good people, but more importantly:

God does good things for bad people. That's my message today.

God does good things for bad people, and you are one of them.

I am too.

We could spend a long time making a list of bad people.

There are hints in the lessons today about some of the people who have been counted bad in the past:

those who oppress the poor; those who treat the rich with favoritism; those who murder; those who commit adultery; those who have faith and no works, gentiles; Rahab the Harlot, Abraham before he had faith, pushy gentile women; deaf gentile men.

It would be best to keep adding to our list of bad people until we are all on there, every one.

For then we can all stake a claim on the mercy of a God who does good things for bad people.

Many do not expect God to do that.

They did not expect Jesus to carry his healing ministry across the Sea of Galilee near Tyre, where he would encounter unclean Gentiles who worshiped false gods and idols.

But Jesus did.

They did not expect him to converse with a pushy woman who spoke too familiarly to him, who presumed on his favor, who did not want to be a disciple, only wanted a healing favor for her daughter.

Gentiles were bad.

And in this story Jesus healed not one but two, and he did not zap them with healing power from across the road.

He did it by touching tongues and putting his fingers in their unclean ears.

So, we could go on, making lists of bad people, never including ourselves, and wishing those on the bad list suffered more.

We could yearn for that morally consistent universe in which we in our self-righteous goodness would come out on top.

We could go on, wondering why so many good people go through so much, raging against God about the world's injustice.

Or, we can accept the universality of our fallen nature, the good news of our badness, knowing that God does good things for bad people.

Those who have drunk deeply from the well of Christian wisdom know that the most remarkable thing in the universe is not random tragedy;

the most remarkable thing in the universe is that God does so much good

in our broken, sin-sick world.

This is the message of the Cross, that at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly, to effect reconciliation between God and us.

Not from afar, not from across the street.

No, in the most intimate way, he gathered our broken human nature to himself and restored the image of God in us through his death and resurrection.

God does great things for bad people; mercy triumphs over judgment. And so we give thanks.