

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Aug 21st 2014

Two themes emerge in my mind from the readings today: 1. God's promise and invitation to us and 2. the attitude of our response. God speaks through Ezekiel of his promise to cleanse, restore and renew us. While we may have stony hearts and many impurities, God draws us together into a covenant promise in which he establishes an intimate relationship between God and God's people. In that relationship, God expects us to live by the standards God sets for us. We can do that because God gives us a new heart and a new spirit with which to prove God's holiness through our lives. That is what the church is about.

In God's promise to cleanse us and make us holy, God recognizes our need for guidance. Our salvation is not a one-time pronouncement, but an invitation to a sustaining relationship. Because we are so prone to wandering, God sets up a relationship in which we are constantly engaged in renewal through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The church helps us practice that relationship through a spirit within us that creates a relationship of joy in salvation, not bondage to law. In order for that relationship to sustain us, we need a willing spirit that comes from knowing that we are God's people in community. We are invited to enter into the relationship with an attitude of humility. We are not invited to bring sacrifices and offerings, but simply our contrite hearts. It seems to me then, that the invitation into the Kingdom of heaven is a generous offer that should not be ignored or mistaken as recognition of our goodness or worthiness. It is a daily invitation to affirm our relationship with God in a feast of holiness. The attitude of our response in affirming that relationship should be one of humility and joy. This attitude we need to bring with us when we worship and live out our daily lives.

I share a short story of how I saw that working around me. There is a small country Presbyterian church on the corner down the road from where I grew up on a farm in Butler County, Iowa. While I attended a Lutheran church in a nearby town, Unity Presbyterian was always a part of my life. All of the kids from the neighborhood attended its Bible school, regardless of denomination. And the entire neighborhood attended its hymn singing events, famous duck suppers, and special guest speaker events. The members were our friends and neighbors and from them I learned the importance of the gift of hospitality. I could walk in that church any time to pray. The invitation was always there. The door was never locked. Because that invitation means so much to me, I keep a relationship with that little church. I stay in touch with the people who remain there, even though there are fewer and fewer of them each year. I worship there at least once every summer and attend its annual hymn singing event, which draws people from many communities in the area.

Sadly, the congregation is dwindling. The old time members are dying off and few new people take their place on the farms. They have had difficulty finding a pastor. Because there are not many Presbyterians in the area they can usually only find aging retired interim pastors who stay for only a short time. But they remain faithful. They also remain humble and joyful. I am very much drawn to their spirit. And God sustains them. Something very beautiful happened last summer. A young

couple moved into a larger community nearby with a small liberal arts college. The husband was hired to be the music director there in a tenure track position. His wife is an ordained Presbyterian minister. She is a lovely gentle young woman in her early 30's that plays the violin. This couple plans to establish their careers in the area. After one year, it is clear that they are agents of God's invitation to joy and renewal. The congregation is once again reaching out to new members and hosting musical events for the surrounding area. It gives me great joy to see how the humble little congregation remains faithful in observing God's decrees with a steadfast spirit. They believe in God's promises and extend God's invitation to the feast in the Kingdom of God. God sustains a willing spirit in them and I think they will be there for a while.

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