

We Are All Teachers of the Goodness of God Within All
based on Exodus 18: 5, 13-23, David Jahnke, 2/14/16

Last week I talked about how the Israelites complained to Moses and Aaron about the scarcity of food and water as they made their way through the desert. So last week I talked about calling our leaders, including us, to do more regarding the problems of scarcity in the richest nation in the world.

Today we get the other side of the story. The Israelites' struggle with scarcity and not having a permanent home led to quite a few conflicts. And everyone was going to Moses to judge between them. And Moses was trying to take it all on. His father-in-law Jethro told him that working this much was not good for anyone. And that Moses should keep teaching them how to live according to God's Way but that he should appoint others to help.

Jesus goes even farther than Jethro. He tells us that we do not need to go to judges to resolve problems; that the power of justice, forgiveness and reconciliation is within us.

Every person can do great work, overcome setbacks and resolve conflicts peacefully. But everyone needs the knowledge and willpower necessary to do so. So our job is to follow Jesus to those stuck in scarcity and conflict and teach them about God's Kingdom which is within and around them.

When people complained about Jesus going and eating with sinners, he told them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." So he went to troubled people not just to forgive them and tell them that they were loved but to cure them of sin. He went to the poor not with anything to hand out, other than his love, his teachings and an occasional miracle. But these were enough to show people how much goodness was deep within them and how to bring this goodness to life for the sake of peace, prosperity and joy.

I started watching a movie based on a true story about a 30-year old woman named Cheryl Strayed...a perfect name because she did stray in a couple of ways. She strayed into the wilderness, deciding to walk a thousand miles of the Pacific Coast Trail, even though she was not really prepared for it.

Well before her mother died at 45 and while they were both college students, her mother was laughing and dancing around the kitchen to Simon and Garfunkel. Cheryl told her to stop it, reminding her: “We have nothing mom!” “Well...we’re rich in love,” said her mom, continuing her dance. “Oh My God! Please don’t even start with that. This house is falling apart. We’re both waitressing full-time. We are going to have student loans the rest of our lives. And you are all alone because you married an abusive alcoholic jerk. What part of that do you not get?”

“There is none of it I don’t get, Cheryl. But then what? If there is one thing I can teach you...it’s how to find your best self. And when you do, hold on to it for dear life. There’s going to be a lot worse days than this before you honey. And you can let them kill you. But I don’t know...I want to live.”

After her mother died, Cheryl went astray. She started using drugs, cheated on her husband, got pregnant and had an abortion, and her husband divorced her. So off she went to the wilderness and there, through struggle, trial and error, the grace of God and the help of a lot of good people along the way, she found her best self. And she started to really live. She discovered how much strength and goodness was inside her. [from the movie *Wild*]

Life is really hard. And most people will go through periods of falling away from God. But they need to know what Cheryl’s mom taught her. That she had a wonderful person deep inside her; to look for that person and cling to that person and keep going back to her.

And we know that finding that that best self is directly connected to God and Jesus. So in a world that emphasizes the self, we do not ignore or mock this critical concept. We simply point out that our best self can only be found by way of God whose image is deep inside people and who is the goodness, grace, peace, and love at the root of all good people.

The other day I read a thought-provoking quote from a Jesuit named Richard Rohr who said, “Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity. He came to change the mind of humanity about God.” Rohr is rejecting the theory of substitutionary atonement; at least the form which sees Jesus’ death on the cross as a transaction between God and humanity instead of a means of transforming humanity and our relationship with God. Rohr writes that this theory has allowed Christians to largely “ignore Jesus’ lifestyle and preaching, because all we really need Jesus for is [his sinless life which we think we cannot emulate and his death.]” [Richard Rohr, <https://cac.org/incarnation-instead-of-atonement-2016-02-12/>]

Jesus did not come merely to die for the sake of a final appeasement of God, like the greatest animal sacrifice ever. We know that such sacrifices did not necessarily make a difference to God or humanity. Time and again the prophets were critical of sacrifices that only “appeased” God and allowed people to keep living the same way. So why would we think of Jesus’ death along similar lines? Jesus was born and lived and died and rose to transform the hearts and minds and lives of all human beings, not to carry out some transaction which would take effect in some other world.

The Jubilee of God which Jesus brought to this world does not release prisoners that they might commit crimes again; or open the eyes of the spiritually blind so that they might choose to throw dust back in their eyes day after day. He did not free the oppressed that they might return to the oppression that enslaved them in the first place...which by the way the Israelites were tempted to do when they were hungry and were thinking of the food provided by their masters in Egypt!

But to remain free, we and they have to know the Ways of God. That is why Moses taught and kept teaching the Israelites. That is why Jethro told Moses that he could not do it by himself. There was too much instruction necessary. And that is why today, in your hearing, this scripture is fulfilled. Moses and Jesus are appointing you today as leaders and teachers of God’s children.

You might say that Moses only chose the best and brightest to be his judges and teachers. Well Jesus chose some of the simplest and the darkest to be his disciples and apostles. You might think you do not know enough about God or Jesus or the Bible. Well then come to small groups or read the Bible and spiritual materials more often on your own. You might think you do not have time. But this is what all of your time is meant to be all about!

And you are already carrying out this mission in your workplaces and homes; unless you work for an evil business...or you are completely negligent as a parent or grandparent or aunt or uncle...neither of which I can imagine. And since all of your good work is from and for God and not about your boss or the bottom line, reorient your view of your vocation. And if it is not clear to you how your work is connected to God, ask me about it. And remember that a critical part of your calling is to be a loving and caring and otherwise transformative presence to your co-workers. Every day is an opportunity to show them a little light and a little love.

And maybe you need to follow Jethro's advice to Moses to not overdo it at work...which would allow you to have more time for what is explicitly God's business elsewhere. It does not have to be here...though we are looking for people to join committees where you would get to know wonderful people and do wonderful work. But it does not matter where; it may be at a school or through another organization.

And the work is quite simple. Letting people know how good they are deep down. And showing them with your face, your words and your deeds what that goodness looks like.

All this can shine through you by way of the one who can do far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine; the God of all grace to whom belongs all the glory and the power in Christ Jesus and the church, now and forevermore.

