

New Management

Today God tells us a new management team is in place.

Referring, of course, to God's management of humanity, which leads to how we are called to manage ourselves, and each other.

And yet, this management isn't so new after all; it just seems that way to us, because it's a style of management we find so abhorrent or just plain ridiculous.

I shall explain!

We are back in Genesis this morning. and here's God, making yet another totally one-sided deal with yet another fellow who may or may not deserve such a deal.

Last week it was Noah.

This week, it's Abram.

Here's the deal: "You are mine forever."

"I am your God forever."

A marvelously one sided deal that says "trust in me and you will be well;" which we then almost immediately, for reasons that mystify nearly everyone, reduce to a mere tit for tat contract, ignoring the power, the beauty and the sheer grace of covenant.

There is something deep inside we human beings that needs to feel we deserve the things that come our way; good or bad.

So we invent Karma, a very human way to think that we get what's coming to us — good or bad.

We insist the just will be saved and the bad guys condemned.

All of which is completely at odds with the bizarre, upside down and inside out mystery that we call the Christian life.

Paul is all over this in today's letter.

"Getting what we deserve" is what Paul calls the Law.

Tit for tat.

Karma.

Earn God's blessing or God's curse.

It's all summed up by Paul in one three letter word: Law.

We love the Law!

It makes sense, it is predictable, and it satisfies something very deep-seated in every one of us: you get what you deserve.

A fellow was convicted of armed robbery at the age of 22.

Somehow, before he was put in jail to serve his 13 year sentence, the system lost track of him.

He ended up getting a job, getting married, having children and becoming a model citizen.

Many years later, the system found him, and promptly put him in jail to serve his 13 year sentence.

Folks holding tight to the law said: "Serves him right, do the time!" while others wondered what possible purpose was being advanced.....

Faith, and her sister Mercy, are the opposite of Law.

Faith and Mercy are unpredictable.

They reward the wrong people, at the wrong time, for behaving in the wrong way.

You can't nail down Faith, or her sister Mercy.

The Law says "have your kids early, because before you know it, your parts will stop working - then you're sunk."

But Faith and Mercy find a way to make 90 year old women pregnant, and 100 year old men fathers.

If you think we're the only ones who find that ridiculous, well, we're not.

In our lesson from Genesis this morning, there is a verse that is skipped by the genius' who put together the reading.

If you check your reading for today, you'll notice we read Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16.

Missing from today's reading is verse 17, the verse right after God says of Sarah: "I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her, and she shall give rise to nations, and kings shall come from her."

The very next verse has Abraham falling flat on his face — NOT out of joy or out of reverence or out of fear at the great power of God; the very next verse has Abraham falling on his face LAUGHING!!

I quote:

"Abraham fell flat on his face. And then he laughed, thinking, "Can a hundred-year-old man father a son? And can Sarah, at ninety years, have a baby?"

Faith and her sister Mercy do wonderful things, outlandish things!

Not only do the nearly dead elderly give birth, but Faith and her sister Mercy forgive unforgivable crimes — welcome people who are not worthy of being welcomed.

The Law fights wars and battles and other people.

It separates the good from the bad.

The Law is best seen in shades of black and white.

But Faith, and her sister Mercy, suffer and die in response to violence.

They see good and bad as completely tangled up with one another, right down to the very roots of it all.

They see life, not as black and white but as the blended colors of the rainbow, bleeding into one another, where all that is finds itself contained within the One who always was.

What God set out to do with Sarah and Abraham — a one-sided deal in which God takes on all the obligations, well, that's what Jesus comes to restore.

It's the new management of what it is to be human, of where we come from — and to whom we belong — and where we are going.

It rests on Faith, and her sister Mercy.

The calculating, stultifying "I got mines" of the law is put back in its place — yet this new management gives the first disciples as much heartburn as it gives us.

Peter, this morning, is beside himself, as Jesus explains how this new management system works:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

These are the things that Faith, and her sister Mercy, do.

This is God's way, and it is the way God invites us to be, if we wish to discover what it truly means to be a human being.

It has less to do with piety, and more to do with practice.

Less to do with purity than with perception.

Chris Wiman tells this story:

"One day when I had gone to a little chapel near my office at lunchtime and was once more praying, while wondering how and why and to whom I prayed, a man came in and eased into the pew directly across the aisle from me.

As we were the only two people there his choice of where to sit seemed odd, and irritating. Within a couple of minutes, all thought of God was gone into the man's constant movements and his elaborate sighs, and when I finally rose in exasperation, he stood immediately to face me.

He had the sandblasted look of long poverty, the skeletal clarity of long addiction, and that vaguely aggressive abasement that truly tests the nature of one's charity.

Very cunning, I noted, failing the test even as I opened my wallet: to stake out a little chapel to prey upon the praying!

For days then it nagged at me — not him — but it, the situation — which, I finally realized, was precisely the problem; how easily a fatal complacency seeps into even those acts we undertake as disciplines, and how comfortable we become with our own intellectual and spiritual discomfort.

Wondering how and why and to whom I prayed?

I felt almost as if God had been telling me, as if **Christ** were telling me (in church no less): get off your mystified ass and **do** something." My Bright Abyss, 84.

It's why Mark tells us so little of what Jesus actually taught.

There are very few parables in this gospel.

There are no long speeches.

Just a series of action scenes — just a travelog with Jesus.

Meaning, perhaps, for Mark, what matters most isn't learning what Jesus says or figuring out what Jesus means, as much as coming to see that what might matter the most is **being** with Jesus — and **doing** with Jesus, then and now.

Mark seems to be saying that the whole world is permeated **by** and **of** and **with** Jesus — that he is not merely some historical figure who lived and died nor is he merely some spiritual figure who lived then went off to a far away heaven — but that he lived and died and is raised again to become one with all creation, one with all of our lives — not only then, but now, today, this moment.

That, by Faith, and her sister Mercy, we can catch glimpses of the living Jesus in any part of life — whether it's in the midst of frantic office work or over beer in the bar or on our knees in church, and even face to face with the street guy in that quiet city chapel, hand outstretched.

In the very life we live, so lives Jesus.

So we come here, week in and week out, to develop the eyes to see him, the ears to hear his call.

And that felon who got locked up after all those years of becoming a new man?

After a few months inside, they let him go.

Faith and Mercy, God's new management team, still work their wiles, even today, in these, our times.

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