

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, November 18, 2007  
Rev. John Tapscott

“GETTING GOD RIGHT”

Isaiah 12; Romans 8:31,32

Recently I was driving in downtown Toronto and I was reminded of one thing I dislike about city driving - streetcar tracks. They have a mind of their own. Once your wheels hit one you go the way the track chooses rather than the way you choose. It takes a jerk on the steering wheel to get out of a track. But when you do the tires on the other side of the car catch the track over there. You have keep moving the steering wheel to stay out of those ruts.

Sometimes we get stuck in a rut when it comes to our understanding of God. Isaiah the prophet writes in chapter 12, verse 1, ‘You will say in that day, “I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.”’ Now Isaiah was not stuck in a rut. In fact, his balanced view comes close to the deep understanding of God’s nature. The deepest Biblical truth about God is captured in a rhetorical question by the apostle Paul in Romans 8: 31, 32, “If God is for us who can be against us? If God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” The truth about God in his relationship to us is this; God is for us; God is on our side. In all that God has done for us and continues to do for us, in all he has given us and gives us now, in the word he has spoken to us, in the very depth of his character, God is for us. To know that is to get God right.

But Isaiah’s words do indicate the two opposite ruts people get into with regard to their understanding of God. And both need to be adjusted and corrected by the truth that God is for us.

“For though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.” Now on one hand, people can fall into the rut of thinking of God as dark and wrathful, a God of furrowed brow and wagging finger with a thunderbolt or two thrown in. Some misguided souls use this idea of God to take vengeance on others whom they think God is angry with. We do not do that. But we can fall into the rut of thinking that God is personally angry with us, pursuing us in order to catch us or trip us up.

The curious thing is that when we think of God this way we are ascribing to him a quality don’t like in ourselves. Now the Bible tells us “to be angry but not to sin.” Righteous anger arose in Moses when he came down Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments and saw the

Hebrews worshipping a golden calf. Moses threw down the tablets and smashed them. And Moses paid a price because he had to climb up the mountain again to get new tablets from God. We see righteous anger in Jesus when he cleansed the Temple. Jesus' anger arose not over a personal slight but because of unrighteousness in God's house. And Jesus paid the price for his action because it was one of the things which led to his death. Becoming angry without sinning means becoming angry over a cause greater than yourself and a willingness to pay the cost of setting things right. Of course, our anger is usually not like that.

A man and his wife pulled into a gas station. As the tank was being filled, the attendant washed the windshield. When he finished, the man said, "It's still dirty. Wash it again." So the attendant did, looking for any bugs or dirt he'd missed. When he finished, the man in the car became angry. "It's still dirty. Do it again!" The attendant cleaned the windshield a third time, again looking carefully for spots he'd missed. By now the driver was fuming. He yelled, "It's still dirty. You should be fired! You are the worst windshield washer I have ever seen!" Just then the man's wife reached over, took his glasses off his head, cleaned them with a Kleenex and handed them back to her husband. He slumped down in his seat very embarrassed as he now saw a spotless windshield.

So often our anger is petty and self-righteous. It rises and falls like a tornado, but accomplishes nothing, other than making ourselves look foolish. And afterwards we don't feel good about ourselves. We know we need the forgiveness of God and others.

We don't like such anger in ourselves, but we get in our mind that God is like that. Isaiah says, "Thou was angry with me," indicating that God was personally angry with the prophet or the people. But the fuller Biblical truth is that God is not angry with us in a personal way. God is for us, which means that like a loving parent, he is against all that harms us.

People may get the idea God is angry with them because of a phrase in the Bible, "the wrath of God." It sounds even worse than God's anger. But it's actually the expression of God's goodness and love, not the contradiction of it. One New Testament scholar makes an observation about this phrase "the wrath of God", as Paul uses it in Romans. He points out that Paul speaks of the love of God and says that God is loving; he speaks of the mercy of God and says that God is merciful; he speaks of the righteousness of God and affirms that God is righteous. But though Paul speaks of the wrath of God, he never says that God is wrathful. And this is because the wrath of God is not an expression of God's personal anger with us. Rather it is God's constant and steady opposition to all that would make his children and his creation less than what God intends us to be.

Now Paul tells us how God can be for us and yet be against with the sin and evil and wrongness which are in our lives and our world, He says, "God did not spare his own Son,

but gave him up for us all.” In Christ’s death on the Cross, God quarantines the power of sin and evil by taking it upon himself. God perfectly separates us and our sin, so he can always be for us, and yet always against sin. God is for us and against the power of sin and death that would separate us from Him in time and eternity. That’s why he gave His Son to save us. And when we put our faith in Christ, God declares us forgiven, justified, and righteous in his sight. Through faith in Christ we are children of God now and forever, children who shall not perish apart from God, but have eternal life with God.

Some people go through life thinking that God is angry with them. If you are in that rut your understanding can be corrected by hearing the deeper truth. No matter who you are or what the past holds, no matter what you think of yourself, God is not angry with you. God loves you. God is for you. God wants only the best for you. God wants you at home with Him, in a loving relationship with Him. Isaiah says, “Though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.” Whatever he thought about the anger of God was overcome by the comfort of God. Isaiah was close to the truth that God is always for us.

But Isaiah’s words point out another rut people fall into in their understanding of God. They get stuck in the rut of thinking of God only in terms of their personal comfort. They believe that God exists to make them comfortable and successful and to do their bidding. But God’s goal is not just to make us comfortable and leave us as we are. God loves us too much for that. God is at work to make us like Jesus. God may even allow us to become uncomfortable sometimes in order to accomplish that great goal. And God empowers us by the Holy Spirit so that we may do God’s will, not our will, but his will, upon the earth.

A phase parents go through is hearing their child say, “You don’t love me”, when you correct or discipline them. Parents, don’t let those words, “You don’t love me,” stand in the way of disciplining a child. In your heart you know you’re doing out of love and for their own good and the shaping of their character. In time your child will come to recognize that, too.

Even when God disciplines and corrects us, God is for us. God proved that he is for us always when he gave us his Son. If God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for our sake, will he not also give us all the things we really need?

A woman by the name of Darryl Potter, who lives in Toronto, wrote a book titled *God's Wonderful Gift to Me*. One day at the office, Darryl hit her knee against a file cabinet, which resulted in devastating blood clots. In spite of many operations, she lost one leg at the hip, and the other leg above the knee. Her right arm had to be amputated and she lost sight in one eye. All the pain she endured led to an addiction to pain pills. In the meantime, her husband began to drink and abuse the children. That situation resulted in Darryl having to divorce

him. Her children then went to live with her mother. You would think, well, her life is over. But one day Darryl heard God ask her, "Why are you afraid?" That question led her to take stock of her life and to set aside self-pity. She began, and continues to this day, to travel across Canada speaking to people about helping the handicapped. Darryl writes, "It's not my missing limbs that matters now, but what is within me that counts. God has an image, a picture of me, one of which I could never be ashamed. A picture so perfect that I will be able to withstand anything, no matter how bad things become. God's gift to me is life, and what I do with this life is my gift to God."

Oh yes, God does comfort us, but don't forget that word comfort comes from two Latin words meaning "with strength". God comforts us, not always by making life smooth and easy for us, but making us strong in the face of our enemies, by making us more than conquerors through Him who loves us, by making us more like his Son.

Isaiah says, "I will give thanks to thee, O Lord. For though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. Behold God is my salvation: for I will trust and will not be afraid for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Paul writes, "If God is for us, who is against us?" Well, it doesn't take long to discover that there are things against us in this life. But God is not one of them. God is for us. As we raise our children in the Christian faith, this is what we want them to learn and know about God - that in all times and all places and in all he does, God is for us. We want them to trust God and not be afraid. We want them to know God as their strength and song and joyfully drink from the well of salvation God has provided in Jesus Christ. We should want it for ourselves, too. God is for us. And if our lives and our children's lives are going to be fulfilled in time and eternity then we must put ourselves on God's side by faith and commitment. God is for us, therefore, let us be for God.