

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Isaiah 49:1-7

Never in Vain

Isn't reading the Bible fun?

What? Whoever looks at a woman lustfully has committed adultery and "if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell." Are you kidding me? More like tear this page out. [Tear page out of old book]

"I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them." Sure, he's got some things mixed up, but that preacher at the whatever-kind-of-church is a great guy and I really enjoy listening to him. He doesn't get all worked up about the little things, you know. What's the big deal? Besides, he waves a Bible around while he talks. [Tear page out of old book]

Wives, submit to your husbands as Christ submits to the Church. Lord, you must not have met my husband. [Tear page out of old book]

Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the Church. Lord, she might like to see me die, but I ain't dying for her. [Tear page out of old book]

Forgive as the Lord forgave you. But they don't deserve my forgiveness. They're not sorry enough. They're jerks. [Tear page out of old book]

God loves a cheerful giver. I wish He loved paying my credit card bill. [Tear page out of old book]

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing. Hey, I come enough to stay on the books, to be on the basketball team, to get buried when I die. It's not the fireworks or anything. [Tear page out of old book]

Jesus walked on water. Really, who does that? [Tear page out of old book]

I and the Father are One. That doesn't make any sense. [Tear page out of old book]

"Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy." Translation: no fun. No thanks! [Tear page out of old book]

Okay, let's see what we've got left: And Terah begat Abram. Why should I care who begat Abram? [Throw old book in the garbage]

Isn't reading the Bible fun?

Now, before you walk out of here or toss me out of here, let me assure you, that wasn't a Bible. But you should be outraged at the thought of someone tearing pages from the Bible, shouldn't you? And isn't that how it seems much of the world, even much of that part of the world that calls itself Christian, treats it? But shouldn't we be just as outraged at all the times we've left the pages intact but ignored them, neglected them, rolled our eyes at them, forced them to fit our whims, paradigm or way of speaking, lived or act contrary to it. Are you still indignant?

Every once in a while one observes an attitude toward the Church and her Ministry, whether in one's own life, in the parish, in the synod, in the community, or in society in general, that tempts him to throw in the towel, to think the fight is lost. For instance, the idea that the Ministry is for hire, that servants of the Word are servants of your belly to do your bidding, regardless of their convictions or the Bible's principles, that the church is what you call when you want water sprinkled or the dirt shoveled, and what you do your best to disregard in the meanwhile, that the Scriptures are like sprinkles on your big days, but should only be sprinkles, and not the kernel, heart, and center.

We must always understand that pastors and teachers don't work for us. I don't work for you, and neither will the men installed today, and neither does God. I'm your called servant, but Christ is my Master. These men have volunteered to serve you, but Christ is their Master. How does that money end up in the plate, then? The same way it ended up in your pocket: God's goodness. To think otherwise would be like crediting the grocery store when you receive Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion.

Christ is the Boss. This [the Bible] is the terms of employment. And, when it comes down to it, trust me when I tell you that you don't want me working for you, don't want me thinking you pay my salary, because then you'd have a pastor striving to please, not God, but men, then you'd have a pastor turning to men, not God, in the hour of need. The same applies to those about to be installed. In the Church, what matters is what God thinks, what God promises, what God answers, and that is found in that Book whose pages are often so offensive to our sensibilities.

Isaiah's words hit close to home for confessional Christians, and not just for those in the Ministry. All of us who take this Book seriously know that it has often brought us more sorrow than joy, more cross than glory, more criticism than praise, more loss than gain. All of us can identify with weary Israel's lament: "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity."

Jesus asked His first disciples, "What are you seeking?" They wanted teaching, a Rabbi. Now the church asks, "What are you seeking?" and scrambles to give them everything but, because while the twelve might want 100 proof Word, the masses would rather have spiritual wine coolers, yuck it up with some stand-up act called a pastor, rather sing along to some junior high love letter called a hymn.

But Isaiah writes "to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation," and says, "Chin up, soldier." We're not the first to face rejection, won't be the last. Paul and Barnabas wore the soles off their sandals shaking the dust off their feet. When we're rejected for holding to the one true Faith, when we're despised and abhorred for holding to what the Lord has given us to hold onto, we stand in good company, because we stand with the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ, who warned us to what our faith in Him would bring us.

And where would we rather stand than with Jesus, because He takes the pages out of the trash can, and, more importantly, He takes us out of the trash can, and leaves our sins, as we confess them, right where they belong: with the rubbish? "Let it be known to you therefore, brothers," the Apostles preach, "that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses."

And that forgiveness changes everything. God's given you the Book instead of throwing the book at you. And that forgiveness makes this Book worth it all and more valuable than everything else, because God loves us, just as its pages say, and He assures us that we never labor in vain when we labor in Him, and He promises that this Book will bring us nothing that tastes so bitter that the sweet succor of salvation can't wash out of our mouth.

Isaiah tells us: "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth," for what is true of Christ is true of Christ's, of those that belong to Him. Take up His words again, for they are your light and your salvation. They are your message to the world, even when it doesn't like them. They are His message to you, even when you don't like them. And, most of all, they are never in vain, never, ever, ever in vain, for as with the Savior, so with His saved, "surely your right is with the LORD, and your recompense with your God." Amen.