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Ps 86:1-10; Gen 21:8-21; Ro 6:1-11; Mt 10:24-39

Competing Loyalties

“A Baptist minister’s four-year-old son saw baptism by immersion for the first time. He was impressed. The next morning proceeded to baptize his three cats in the bathtub.

The youngest kitten bore it very well, and so did the younger cat, but the old family tom cat rebelled.

This old guy struggled with the boy, clawed his hands and arms, and finally got away. The boy got hold of the old tom cat again and proceeded with the “ceremony.”

But the cat acted worse than ever, clawing and hissing, scratching the boy in the face.

Finally, after barely getting the cat splattered with water, he dropped him on the floor in disgust and said: “Fine, be a Methodist if you want to!” (funnycleanjokes.com)

In the body of Christ – we don’t do anything in isolation. We are joined together in this covenant. We share worship, prayer, mission, ministry – we share our joys and sorrows. And, when we come to Jesus as people who believe in Him and follow Him – we act on our promise. We ask to be baptized as a sign of our loyalty. In the water of Holy Baptism we die to sin. We act out the death of Jesus – when we go under the water. We act out Jesus’ resurrection when we rise out of the water. From then on, we live to God. Baptism is not just an excuse for a party, Baptism is the outward sign of the inward grace only God can give.

Some ask me, “Is my covenant with Jesus good if I haven’t been baptized? My answer is Yes. If a person hears the Good News, repents and receives Jesus as Lord of their life – then tragically dies later that day, (s)he is gathered into the throng of the redeemed around the throne of God. On a Sunday morning, when you and I have plans to do something fun just as soon worship ends, we might forget. But in the night watches and prayer vigils in the ICU, that promise of Jesus’ mighty work on the cross is everything as you and I stare into the face of death. Our loyalty to God in Christ is the most important loyalty in the universe.

Most preachers would rather baptize you sooner rather than later. We like to have your loyalty to Jesus confirmed by the church – the body of Christ. But when you surrender your life to God, God hears, and God acts to free you and me for joyful obedience. Only God is perfectly loyal.

The story of Hagar begins as a tragedy. She feels like a pawn in the hands of her mistress. Sarah, unable to have children, gave Hagar to her husband so she could bear a son. But once Hagar was pregnant, Sarah could not stand Hagar’s superior attitude. When Ishmael was born, the rift between the women became awkward and painful. Abraham loved his son. At last, by a miracle of God, Sarah became pregnant and had a son of her own: Isaac. When Abraham threw a big barbecue in honor of Isaac’s weaning, Sarah thought she heard Ishmael laugh at Isaac. By then, Ishmael was about thirteen. That was the last straw. She banished Hagar and her son. Abraham was distressed, but he did not stop Sarah’s harsh action. God promised Abraham that his firstborn, Ishmael, would also become a great nation. And God’s original promise that Abraham would be the father of a people as vast as the stars of the heavens, and the sands of the seashore would come to pass just as God had said, through Isaac. Double blessing – even in family strife. God is our loyal, devoted heavenly Father.

This story shines with the glorious faithfulness of our God, though Abraham must let Ishmael go. We see that the sovereign will of the Creator cannot be thwarted, diverted or even slowed down by human mistakes – our distrust – or our weak faith. The plan God has for God’s people and for all of creation is not always clear to you and me. When we see what happens in our world, we ask, “Where is God’s goodness in all this?” God says to us, as He said to Abraham,

(Continued on next page.)

“Wait on Me. Watch for what I am doing.” And the great corollary to that truth is, “Pray! Pray for God’s perfect will. Watch and pray. And so, enter into what God is doing.” We are loyal to God because of God’s great loyalty to us.

In our Gospel passage for today Jesus reflects upon what it really means to belong to Him – to be His disciple. Jesus speaks to the disciples as He sends them out to share what they have learned from Him. He is also warning His disciples of the shocking resistance and even hatred they will encounter. He Himself has come up against the Pharisees and teachers of the law in the church. Loyalty to God is a life or death thing.

First, Jesus explains how much God loves His followers – they are precious – God knows the number of hairs on their heads, He cares for them and watches over them. Jesus does not gloss over the cruelty and violence they (and we) encounter in the world. It was here in Jesus’ time – it is still here. He is not trying to break up families when He speaks of all the strife caused by following Him. Jesus is quoting the Prophet Micah. Not so far back in history as Abraham (1900 BC), Micah preached in the late 700s and maybe the early 600s BC. Politics were no more inspiring back then than they are now. Micah prophesied against corrupt officials and rulers. He counted the court prophets among them. These are the ones who repeated what the kings told them to say. Loyalty to a human ruler is misplaced loyalty! Micah had broken with them, and was preaching in the countryside, not the city (Jerusalem).

Micah warns of the coming exile – and further into the future, the coming of Messiah (Jesus Christ). Jesus quotes Micah from 6:5-6 about the enemy being very close. Betrayal of those who are loyal to the God of Israel – who love and serve the Lord and keep His moral standards – is everywhere. He preaches that true hope lies beyond the current chaos, war and exile. Listen:

“But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; Though I dwell in darkness, the Lord is a light for me.”
(Micah 7:7-8)

Jesus does not promise His loyal disciples an easy road. No guarantee against conflict and trouble. God hears your prayers. God will fulfill every promise He has made. Amen.