

Psalm 115 Ezekiel 14:1-11 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 St. Luke 15:11-32

The Way to Optimism

Some of you may remember a sermon I preached a while back in which I compared St. Barnabas with the A. A. Milne character Eyeore the blue donkey. While St. Barnabas represents the eternal optimist, Eyeore epitomizes the eternal pessimist. He always sees things from the dark side and is consequently generally gloomy and negative about everything. Now, while there are some who are more like Eyeore than others, we all tend to have a little of his character buried somewhere inside us, and this tendency to be blue surfaces now and again, especially when things are not going the way we intended them to go.

For instance, politically speaking, the Democrats are Eyeores when a Republican is in office and the Republicans are Eeyores when a Democrat is in office. In both cases, the future is believed to be bleak and each side respectively expects that all will go to the dogs in due course. You see, though our concerns may very well be legitimate concerns, we all tend to forget Who is on the Throne and Who is really in control of all things in the universe, don't we? Or as the Psalmist reminds us: Our God is in Heaven – He does whatever He pleases.

Another good example of Eeyorism can be seen in what people often think about our youth. Take this quote for example. *"Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise; they no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents, chatter before company; gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers."* Do

you know who said that? That was the Greek philosopher, Socrates, who lived around 469-399 BC. Here's another one.

"I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words... When I was young, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly disrespectful and impatient of restraint." Sound a bit like what you may have said about the future of our society? Well, this is a quote taken from the writings of the Greek poet, Hesiod, who lived in the 8th century BC.

But, you know, I as I listen to people speak about the future of our nation, I can't help thinking about the authors of books like *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (Francis Chan), the book I am trying to encourage you all to read and study with another parishioner. And then there are others such as: *How to inherit the Earth: Submitting ourselves to a Servant Savior* (Scott Bessenecker), *Following Jesus Through the Eye of the Needle: Living Fully, Loving Dangerously* (Kent Annan), *Submerge: Living Deep in a Shallow World: Service, Justice and Contemplation Among the World's Poor* (John B. Hayes), and *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement serving the World's Poor* (Scott Bessenecker), to name just a few. Now, these are not books written by our older generation...these are books written by the younger generation. And it is the still younger generation that is reading and applying them...my children and your children and grandchildren. True, they may be a little idealistic at times, especially when it comes to environmental issues, but they are not pessimistic about their future! Indeed many of them realize that it is up to them to make a positive contribution to their future and the future of all in this country and, indeed, the world.

However, Socrates, Hesiod and us are not the first to think in negative terms with regard to our children and grandchildren. Do you remember in the Exodus one of the reasons Israel disobeyed the Lord's command to take the Promised Land once they had reached the Jordan? It was that they were worried about the future of their children! Listen to what God had to say to them about their pessimism in Deuteronomy 1:39 "Moreover your little ones and your children, who you say will be victims, who today have no knowledge of good and evil, they shall go in there; to them I will give it, and they shall possess it." As we read in our Epistle lesson for today, God was not pleased with most of that older generation...indeed only three of the original older generation who left Egypt actually entered into the Land. Joshua, Caleb and Eleazar the High Priest, one of Aaron's sons. God was not pleased with the Jewish Eyeore's in the wilderness and, in many ways, He gave them up to their own pessimistic predictions.

But why would God be displeased with perpetual pessimists? Well, my guess is that it is because their pessimism indicates a lack of understanding with regard to the Person or character of God. Their pessimism shows that the god they believe in does not measure up to the one and only true God. In other words, their pessimism reveals the false god (or the idol) set up in their hearts and minds...a god of impotence or indifference. How else can one be pessimistic when God the Almighty reveals Himself to be good, and kind, and compassionate, and generous, and gracious, and forgiving, and merciful? Not to mention the fact that He knows all our needs and will grant them to us in due time if we but seek His kingdom first and His righteousness.

In this regard our Old Testament reading for today is particularly interesting. The men who came to Ezekiel...men who were considered to be the elders of Israel...these were men who may have thought they were serving the God of Israel or, at worst, they gave the impression that they were serving the God of Israel, while in truth, they were serving a god of their own making...a god of their own creation and imagination. You see, that is essentially what an idol is...anything other than God that controls the way we live... indeed, it is anything that is sufficiently other than God so as to cause us to become estranged from God. And so, in a sense, even willful or slothful ignorance due to a lack of diligent study of God's Word can lead one into idolatry as what one then believes about God is not based upon what He has revealed about Himself (in other words, Who He REALLY is), but rather on what our society and our culture wants us to believe about Him. Such idols will naturally cause us to stumble into sin because they all too often are constructed according to what we are willing to do rather than according to what God wills us to do.

The Prodigal son served an idol that led him away from his father into the raw pursuit of pleasure. But his brother also served an idol that led him away from his father into self-centeredness and self-service. You see, neither of the sons really loved their father...or each other, for that matter. They were both focused in on themselves and consequently only loved themselves. And that, in itself, is the basis upon which idolatry is founded.

So, what is the remedy to this idolatry that causes such pessimism? Well, the remedy is actually quite simple: Repentance...Repentance is a word that means coming to the realization that what you are currently doing is wrong, which leads to a turning away from whatever that may be and to a very conscious and consistent attempt to embrace the

truth by turning to God and all that that entails. For example, through Ezekiel God told the elders of Israel to “Repent, turn from your idols (those false images of God), and turn your faces away from all your abominations.” This, of course, implies a turning toward God Himself. The Prodigal son came to his senses once he contemplated the character of his father and he then turned away from that which was the product of his own making and then returned to his true home. And then in our Epistle reading, St. Paul warned his readers to learn from what happened to those who put their faith and trust in things other than God, so that we might not repeat their mistakes. Indeed he warned us who think we are firm in our faith to consider our lives carefully in the light of what Scripture teaches lest we fool ourselves and trip over our own blind spots.

So, repentance always involves an evaluation of ourselves based upon the truth as revealed to us in God’s Word, a turning away from the errors thus exposed and a turning toward all that is right, which is, of course, God Himself. But you can only do these things if you actually know the truth and if you know the character of the one and only true God...and you can only know His character if He reveals it to you...and you can only know what He has revealed about His character if you take the time to sit down and read, mark, learn and inwardly digest His Word...the Scriptures...the Holy Bible. You know, it never ceases to amaze me that people will spend years studying things pertaining to their very short life here on earth, while they neglect to study those thing pertaining to eternity. But, I’m afraid, the latter is the only way to optimism...any other way is based upon finiteness at best and falsehood at worst and that can and will only lead to pessimism.

So, dearest brethren, today consider the character of the one and only true God...the God revealed to us in the Scriptures...especially as you contemplate His love demonstrated towards you in the sacrifice of His only begotten Son on the cross of Calvary. In many ways, the Eucharist reveals the very heart of God and the core of His being...it reveals His justice in that He refused to turn a blind eye...it reveals His goodness in that He sought a way to be just and yet also forgiving...it reveals His love in that that way cost Him dearly, but He walked it to the end anyway so that you and I might be free to love Him in return. And so, beloved brothers and sisters in Jesus, may I encourage you all to engage in a daily consideration of His character as revealed to us in His Word, as that is the only way that leads to optimism, because it is founded upon the unchanging and unfailing nature of our God...

© Johann W. Vanderbijl III 2010