

God will Get You for that!

It was the catch phrase Bea Arthur's Maude would use. I wish I could say that it was a new idea when she brought it to the screen, but let's face it, it is as old as time itself.

We love the thought. We are on God's side after all. Right? Marked in the waters of baptism, regulars for communion, volunteers for good work. "Whatever you ask in my name," that's what we are told right? The Old Testament is filled with God's retribution against those who were against God.

The desire to find divine retribution against others is rooted deeply in our humanity. We see it in the gospel as well. When Jesus and the disciples are not welcomed in the Samaritan village and turned away, James and John ask, "Should we pray fire down from heaven on them?" Jesus' answer is NO. That's not how we do it anymore. But we still like it.... Don't we.

Any time we can find someone else and blame the ill in their lives on divine retribution, it gives us a moment to make ourselves feel better about ourselves and our own behaviors. But we also take it the opposite direction.

If a pillar of the congregation is diagnosed with cancer, "Such a horrible thing to happen to such a good person."

Here lies our conundrum. If bad things happening to one are God's retribution, then why is it not retribution when bad things happen to someone we hold in esteem?

The answer is simple. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people and none of it has anything to do with how God views us, loves us, or what God thinks of us.

The world is the world and bad things happen as much as good things happen. We might feel like we want to scream "My God My God why have you forsaken me" when that small child is playing drums on the back of your plane seat all the way across the country, but that is wholly disingenuous. The circumstances of our lives have no correlation to the amount of love God has for us, which is both good and bad if we are honest.

We all want to feel like God is willing for bad things to happen to "bad" people because we can then feel good about us wanting bad things to happen to bad people. "Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy..." is something I've said or thought on far too many occasions over the last 50 years. And while that might bring personal comfort to me, it brings no divine comfort and no example of the love I'm called to share with those around me.

Jesus' point today is that we should live a life worthy of being called followers of Christ because we never know when that life will come to an end. While there might be causation between my actions and the resulting reaction, which is a rather academic way of saying that good rarely follows the words "Hey y'all watch this;" there is no correlation between the amount of Love God has for me and the results of my poor choices. God may not like us in those moments or might be equally astounded at our stupidity, but God loves us nonetheless. That is Jesus' point.

Our joy at the misfortune of others is just that, ours. It is wholly human reaction which we wish were divine but is not.

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong once noted that he felt that the parable of the workers indicated that even in that very last moment, when we have died and come face to face with God, we are given the choice to repent and believe. Then and only then is our condemnation sealed by our own choosing for the feast of heaven is open to everyone. That's not really a comforting moment in some folks eyes because we want those people who made our lives miserable to suffer in eternity and if they can suffer a little bit on the route there, even better.

Yet, I surmise that the most common phrase in heaven and hell is the same one "Really, you're here.... Never would have thought that....."

In our living in community, the paradox is that we must focus on ourselves. We must ask are we loving enough, are we caring enough, and are we forgiving enough. Can we follow Jesus all the way to saying "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing...." A statement I like to think I can say freely but know that I don't always or often or ever. Nope, I am more likely to say something like "Stupid gets what stupid deserves...." A statement not really found, even in the most heretical texts.

God's love for us is never ending. Jesus' cry of My God why have you forsaken me was cried for all of us. For from that moment God who made us in the divine image and who loves us regardless of whether or not we are likeable, has never and will never forsake us. For that is the promise made in our redemption on the cross.

Towers will fall. People will do stupid things. Bad things will happen to those we love and the person we like the least will revel in greatness that we deem underserved. But none of it has anything to do with how much God loves or values any of us. And if we are truly honest, each us needs to find comfort in that fact more than anything. Because it is the thing that renews my hope when my humanity overtakes my actions.

Amen.