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A publication of the North Carolina Conference Christian Advocate - August 2015

bible study

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury’s Adult Bible Study Series

By Belton Joyner, Jr.

August 2, 2015
Text: Isaiah 59:15-21
“Our Redeemer Comes”

This week’s study text starts out with some dismal news: “The Lord looked and was upset at the absence of justice” (Isaiah 59:15). Most of the time, we think we’d like justice to be done, because in that way, evil doers will be appropriately punished. We might be a bit less enthusiastic about justice being done if we take a look at the examples Isaiah gives of the things that upset God; for example (Isaiah 58:13-19).

How about not giving any intentional time to God (Isaiah 58:13)? How about judging on the truth to make oneself look good (Isaiah 59:5)? How about counting on things of the world to make life good (Isaiah 59:4)? How about quickly deciding that violence is the way to make things right (Isaiah 59:4)? How about figuring that when push comes to shove we know better than God (Isaiah 59:13)? How about making political points instead of finding common truth (Isaiah 59:14)?

It does not take much imagination to find my name in a couple of places in that list. How about you? That’s the bad news.

What is the good news? God promises to send a redeemer (Isaiah 59:20). In Hebrew culture, the redeemer was usually the next of kin who did what was necessary to pay off the debts of the deceased. Can we hear an echo of our brother Jesus (“...Thou our Father, Christ our brother...”)—stanzas three, hymn 89, United Methodist Hymnal! Jesus, the redeemer, pays off the debt when we die to sin.

God revealed to Isaiah God’s plan to redeem God’s people. It is more than just a promise; it is a covenant (Isaiah 59:21). A covenant always involves two parties, even if one of the parties is more powerful than the other. God’s gift of a redeemer (Isaiah 59:20) is a covenantal gift (Isaiah 59:21). We become God’s covenant partners. And the debt can be paid.

What Someone Else Has Said:
Ed McMinn has written [Daily Devotions for the Hand Faint: Duke Blue Devils, Extra Point]

August 9, 2015
Text: Jeremiah 7:1-15
“A Choice to be Just”

Last Spring, I went to Florida to visit my friends Ken and Pat Birt. One of my favorite things about the trip was some time we spent at Myakka State Park. We drove around the park in their convertible, getting out every once in a while to take a nature trail walk. The Myakka River and its companion lakes are part of the unblemished rugged beauty of the park. Lovely.

But, throughout the park there are signs warning visitors not to get too friendly with the alligators. In fact, one leaflet advises that any alligator that loses its fear of people will have to be destroyed. “Don’t get too close,” one sightseer said. “Those ‘gators are mighty fast.” I didn’t think I needed to be alerted, but when I wanted to get a close-up picture, Ken yelled, “Use the zoom lens!”

Who would need to be warned not to get playful with a twelve-foot alligator? Don’t we know better? Maybe not. Who needs to be told that stealing is bad, that adultery is forbidden, and that telling lies is ugly? Who wouldn’t know those things? But, there it is: Jeremiah 7:9. It seems obvious, but the prophet knows his target audience pretty well. They still need the warning sign. It’s not alligators that disturb Jeremiah; it is the sin of people who ought to know better.
by any way I could” or it might be “I grew up so poor that I developed it.” But I think the word is perhaps “suffering.” It might be “My parents were so strict that it was too much to bear.” Or it might be “My parents were so lenient that I got away with everything.” It might be my shoulder, but it’s cultural, because I grew up, everybody bought fill in the blank.” It might be my bad luck in relationships. It’s a combination of all around on my spouse; he never did love me.” It might be the absence of advertising (“I bought that 82-inch HD TV because it had such a great picture”).

Whatever excuse is offered, Ezekiel says that it won’t work. “Only the one who sins will die” (Ezekiel 18:4). God does not fall for the blame-game. Individuals bear the accountability for decisions, words, and actions. On the positive side, God is pleased when an individual chooses to do what is right (Ezekiel 18:3a, 9b).

On the second point, the prophet offers a way for sinners to be restored to God’s favor (Ezekiel 18:31). It is repentance (Ezekiel 18:30). The Old Testament primarily uses two words for “repent.” One of them (nšan) means “to be sorry or regret.” The other (šâhûb) means “to turn back or turn around.” As we can tell from the Common English Bible translation of Ezekiel 18:30, the prophet says that what pleases God is not so much our attitude as it is our action: “Turn, turn away from your sins” (Ezekiel 18:30, CEB). Repentance is more than feeling bad about our sin; repentance is doing something about it.

The prophet is clear that God does not want people to choose the way of death, of brokenness, of emptiness. But, somehow, in order to have the fullness of life, we have to change our way of living. “I, declares the Lord, ‘I will make you put into action the words of your mouth and the plans of your heart; they will succeed’” (Ezekiel 18:32).

What Someone Else Has Said:
Sara Miles (City of God: Faith in the Streets, Jericho Books) writes: “Repentance requires paying attention to others, and learning to love, even a little bit, what God loves so much: the whole screwed-up world, our holy city, the people God created to be his own.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “It’s me; it’s me; it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer...”

August 23, 2015 Text: Zechariah 7:8-14 “God Demands Justice”
The portion of Zechariah that we study this week was probably written after the people of Judah had returned from exile. They were busily trying to re-establish life in Jerusalem. All the memories of being in captivity in Babylon were no doubt playing in their heads. All of the work to-be-done must have grieved them each morning. What about the kin folks who had stayed in Judah when others had been hauled off? “I need to find Aunt Rachel and see if she is okay.” What about finding supplies for re-building my family bosom that got torn down while we were in Babylon? (“Where can I find the tools I need because Horse Depot was destroyed by the enemy?”) You get the picture. If ever there was a time for priorities to be adjusted—a particular time and circumstances, this would be it. If ever God’s people were to be cut a little slack, this would be the time.

But not so fast! The prophet Zechariah calls the roll of those one might overlook in such a time of national emergency: the woman left without a breadwinner, the child left without parent care, the husband who is “different,” and the person who is flat broke (Zechariah 7:10). Getting Jerusalem restored was important work, but so was caring for “each other.” The temption is to define “each other” as “me and my kind.” Zechariah brings God’s larger challenge: “each other” includes “the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor” (Zechariah 7:10). I saw a photograph taken during the 2012 presidential debate between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. The two men were pointing at each other as if in accusation. Someone added the words that we might hope each was saying about the other: “created in the image of God.” That’s one reminder from Zechariah. When we look at those who seem so different from us, we do well to remember “each other” is “created in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27).

That makes a difference in how we treat one another. Kindness, Compassion. (Zechariah 7:9). The name “Zechariah” means “Yahweh has remembered.” If God has remembered, he recalled, those whom we might call “lesser,” so must we. No matter how busy we might be doing other good things, we are to show kindness and compassion to each other.

What Someone Else Has Said:
In The Poor and the People Called Methodists (Kingswood Books), Richard Feitzizerer wrote, “To and the helpless poor

were “It’s Yours, O Lord...”

This is not the place to debate pre-tax titling vs. post-tax titling or to compare gifts through the Church with gifts directly to the needy or to ponder rote titling or heartfelt justice (Luke 11:42). This is, however, a place to hear the encounter with God that in- 
vites—so, commands—to be systematic and thorough in our gifts to the Lord. Hmmmm.

What Someone Else Has Said: Cattress of Arles, a fifth- and sixth-century bishop wrote (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT XIV, Inter-varsity Press): “Lanis, inept one. You know that everything belongs to God; you will not give the Creator all of things something of his own?”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Return to a Just God”
There is a story of a man who going to be baptized by immersion. The pastor said, “I am going to put you all the way under the water as a sign of all of you and everything you have is being claimed by the Lord.” As the pastor dipped the fellow into the water, the man being “dunked” reached into his pocket and fumbled out his wallet. He held it high above his head, making sure that his pochette did not get wet. Hmmmm.

The family was out for supper at the local diner. “Yum,” the pork chops were good. “Yum,” the sweet potato fries were good. “Yum,” the carrot cake dessert was good. Dad was pleased with the delicious meal and the careful service. He added twenty percent as a tip and smiled at the wait-ress. The five-year-old looked at her father and asked, “Why did you give her twenty percent and only give God ten percent?” Hmmmm.

Two men found themselves stranded on a deserted island. It was unlikely that any ships would pass that way. It was unlikely that any rescue planes could spot them. The situation was dire indeed. One of the men was in a state of panic: “We are doomed! We are doomed!” The other man was calm and at ease. “How can you be so calm when we are doomed?” the other man inquired. “Oh, they will find us,” the other replied, “and soon.” “How can you be so sure?” “Because I make $2,000,000 a year and I am fat. My pastor will find me.” Hmmmm.

Malachi offers a challenge from God. The tithe (ten percent) had a long history as part of the Hebrew tradition. It helped the poor, the immigrants, the or-phans (Deuteronomy 26:21). It helped the Levite, the priests who maintained community worship life (Numbers 18:21). It helped one stay right with the Lord (L직wvca 27:30). So, in Malachi (around five centuries before Christ), the prophet brings this challenge from God: “Test me... see if I do not open all the windows of heaven for you...” (Malachi 3:10).
Excerpts from a Research study of Church Values

United Methodist Communications conducted this research in several phases. The first phase involved focus groups with pastors, leaders and members in four U.S. cities in different regions of the country. These qualitative findings provided direction for the development of the surveys. The phone survey included pastors randomly selected from United Methodist databases. Leaders were selected randomly among current subscribers of Interpreter magazine, who have been designated as key leaders by pastors in their local church. Findings for general church membership resulted from an online poll among United Methodists conducted through an outside consumer research panel.

Roles Affect Perception of What it Means to be United Methodist

In the U.S., perceptions of United Methodist values differ by a person’s role and experience. What has a high degree of importance to a pastor may be of much less significance to a church member, and especially to those who don’t attend regularly. But most United Methodists agree that an emphasis on God’s grace is very important, as well as having a Communion table where all are welcome.

These are some of the findings of an extensive new quantitative study by UM Communications conducted in November-December 2014.

More than 39% of member respondents are United Methodists because they were born into United Methodist families. Beyond that, the reasons respondents gave as to why they became a member of The United Methodist Church were varied. Beliefs and teachings were the second most frequently mentioned reason for affiliation (17%), followed by liking the people, liking the pastor, or marrying into a United Methodist family (all 8%). Some like the church’s emphasis on social issues (4%), while 2% find a convenient location to be the prevailing factor.

Most Important Values

The survey found some pronounced differences between what pastors, church leaders and members consider important values for The United Methodist Church.

Members’ responses were quite fragmented, but more than half of members surveyed agreed that an emphasis on God’s grace, open Communion, acceptance of all people, church fellowship, a strong Scriptural foundation and an emphasis on mission and outreach in local communities were very important values for The United Methodist Church.

Pastors were more solidly in agreement, with more than 90% of those surveyed declaring the importance of an emphasis on God’s grace, open Communion, an emphasis on local mission and outreach and a strong Scriptural foundation. But some of the values which rated high for pastors were low for members; for example, a balance of personal and social holiness was of top importance to less than one-third of members surveyed while 81% of pastors put it in the “very important” tier. Church fellowship was more important to leaders than any other group, and they were more interested in bringing people to Christ than were other members (88% vs. 45%). Both leaders and pastors cited an emphasis on worldwide mission twice as frequently as members.

“What we’re seeing is that people in different roles with different experiences have different perceptions,” said Sherri Thiels, interim chief executive of United Methodist Communications. “Church leaders are more likely to share pastors’ values, possibly because their roles bring them into greater contact with work at the denominational level, while members are more focused on personal and local experiences.”

Differences Among Members of the Same Groups

The survey found that United Methodists who attend church regularly were twice as likely as those who attend infrequently to say a strong Scriptural foundation and an emphasis on bringing people to Christ were among the most important values for The United Methodist Church.

There were appreciable differences between pastors with different theological training where some values were concerned. For example, just 54% of pastors who attended non-United Methodist seminaries cited being a connectional church as a very important value, compared to 72% of pastors who attended United Methodist seminaries. Being “accepting of different views” was very important to only 44% of pastors from non-UM seminaries vs. 68% of pastors from UM seminaries. But when it came to identifying values that were uniquely United Methodist, there was little to no disparity.

Among leaders, women and men had differing viewpoints on some topics; 73% of women said being accepting of differing views was very important, compared to 51% of men. Women were also more supportive of worldwide mission and outreach (73% vs. 57%).

Did You Know?

For all the power of his eyes and voice, John Wesley measured five-feet-three inches tall and weighed 128 pounds!

Susanna Wesley was one of the few women of her time to have a college education. She was committed to teaching her children the scriptures and encouraged them to be devout followers of a life of faith.