

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
August 22, 2010
Luke 13:10-17

The group of students was asked to answer quickly, without reflection, the question: "Do you think God understands radar?"

"In nearly every case the reply was "No," followed of course by a laugh, as the conscious mind realized the absurdity of the answer. But, simple as this test was, it was quite enough to show that AT THE BACK OF THEIR MINDS these youngsters held an idea of God quite inadequate for modern days."

This little experiment was conducted back in the 50's, and it now seems almost quaint to think of times when the cutting edge of modern technology was...radar. The author pursues the topic with the teenagers:

"Subsequent discussion showed plainly that while "they had not really thought much about it," they had freely to admit that the idea of God, absorbed some years before, existed in quite a separate compartment from their modern experience, knowledge, and outlook. It was as though they were revering the memory of a Grand Old Man, who was a great power in His day, but who could not possibly be expected to keep pace with modern progress!"

There are probably many people today with a similar "split" in their mental conceptions. The "Grand Old Man" is treated with reverence and respect --look what a help He was to our forefathers! -- but He can hardly be expected to cope with the complexities and problems of life today! If the absurdity of this "split" makes us laugh, so much the better.

The person who conducted it was J.B. Phillips, who writes about it in a book with a wonderful title: "Your God Is Too Small."

I particularly love that line, "If the absurdity of this split makes us laugh, so much the better." The laughter that comes from realizing how absurd it was that we thought God couldn't understand radar, is itself a gift from God. At a dinner party I went to, the conversation during dessert turned to people describing the various concepts they'd picked up as little children about "where babies come from" and how funny those ideas seem in retrospect: all the clever metaphors that a child's mind took literally, all the associations that turned out to be a little wacky. Even the children who had gotten information that was correct in a strictly technical sense, as adults laughed at the way their old understanding was missing some fairly important aspects of the process, which they did not fully appreciate until much later.

I imagine that for each of us, our first day in heaven will be filled with that kind of laughter. On our first day in heaven all of us, liberals and conservatives alike, will look back at all the various ways in which our thoughts and attitudes about God during our earthly lives were so inadequate, so off the mark, so ridiculous, and we'll all talk over together all those crazy ideas we used to have, before we experienced what God is truly like, and we'll laugh together until the tears run down our cheeks. Perhaps that is part of the process Paul is talking about when he says, "now we see through a glass darkly, then we will see face to face." And maybe it is that kind of cleansing laughter that prepares us to open ourselves to the sense of awe in the dynamic force of who God truly is, that kind of cleansing laughter prepares us to be lost in wonder, love and praise.

Unless, of course, my image of heaven turns out to be way off the mark, and heaven turns out to be something completely different from what I think now.

But what intrigues me most about this episode with J.B. Phillips and his conversation with the teenagers and radar is that it is exactly the attitude Jesus himself challenges in today's gospel reading. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. A crippled woman shows up. Jesus takes the initiative, calls her over, and says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When Jesus lays his hands on her, immediately she stands up straight and begins praising God. Great!

But what is the response of the leader of the synagogue? He is, Luke tells us, indignant. He is indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, and he keeps saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." The important point in this passage is that Jesus is ready to roll. He sees that the woman needs to be healed, and he sets her free from her ailment *immediately*. The leader of the synagogue wants to slow Jesus down. He says everyone needs to come back later, on another day that's not the Sabbath, and Jesus needs to wait until then to heal them.

The great irony here is that human beings think we're the modern ones and that God is old-fashioned. But scripture shows us the real Jesus, the Jesus who is ready to move into the future, to go ahead with acts of love to change this woman's life forever, setting her free immediately. Who's the one who is stuck in the past? It's not Jesus; it's

the leader of the synagogue, who insists that Jesus should not do anything new, that Jesus ought to do things the way they've been done in the past.

When God moves into the future, people get indignant. And how does Jesus deal with the indignant people? Does he give in to them and say he won't do anything controversial if they don't like it? Does he say he'll wait until everyone agrees before he does anything new? Does he tell the woman, "I know you've been suffering for eighteen years already, but you have to wait longer because some people will be indignant?"

Jesus instead turns to the indignant man and says, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from bondage on the Sabbath day?" Jesus says, "you give blessings to animals, how can you tell me to withhold blessings from people who have been putting up with so much suffering for so many years, and who now finally have the chance to be free of it? How can you tell me to make them wait longer because you're feeling indignant? You hypocrites!"

Yeah, God understands radar all right. And God understands quite a few other things that humanity needs to catch up on. One of the things Jesus understands is the art of loving dangerously. Jesus is willing to move ahead to perform an act of compassion for this woman even though he knows how vehemently indignant his opponents will be. Well, if they're going to be indignant, let them be indignant. They're not going to hold Jesus back.

It's easy to give indignant religious people more attention than they really deserve, but Jesus simply gives them what for and then goes on with his ministry. As Luke tells us, "When Jesus said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." Yes!

A parishioner put up on our bulletin board an article from the Richmond Times-Dispatch about the novelist Anne Rice's announcement that she remains "committed to Christ" but is "quitting Christianity." Anne Rice wrote, "In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life." And I want to say, "Hello, Anne Rice! You do not have

to ditch all of Christianity just because there are some indignant folks who are anti-, anti-, anti-! Come on over to St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Heathsville! We're the crowd who's rejoicing with Jesus at all the wonderful things he is doing!"

There are people who are anti-, anti-, anti, and people who are indignant in every denomination of every religion. And, lest we forget, there are people who are anti-, anti-, anti- and indignant in every group of non-religious people too. They exist in every generation from Jesus' to our own. There are people who think that God can't quite keep up with modern life, when in reality we're the ones who have trouble keeping up with God. But there are also people who are excited about following this Jesus who has the courage to love dangerously, despite the opposition from people who are indignant and want to slow him down. There are people who respond to gifts from God not by criticizing, but by praising God. There are people who join the crowd in rejoicing at all the wonderful things God is doing.

There is now a facebook page entitled , "The Episcopal Church Welcomes Anne Rice." (www.facebook.com/pages) There is also a thoughtful and beautifully written letter to Anne Rice posted online at Episcopal Café.

(http://www.episcopalcafe.com/daily/episcopal_church/the_only_thing_that_makes.php An open letter to Anne Rice by Jane Redmont posted Aug. 9) Both have some great comments from folks who believe that God understands blogging and web-based social networking.

But what matters is not just what happens in the life of one author of popular vampire novels. Because there are Anne Rices all over the country. There are plenty of people who have seen only the indignant parts of Christianity, and think that's all there is to Christianity. Our job is to tell people, "Hello! We exist! We believe God understands radar! We believe God knows how to work the DVD player! And the computer! The Episcopal Church welcomes you! Much more important, Jesus welcomes you! You don't have to be indignant! You can rejoice with those who rejoice at all the wonderful things God is doing! God is not just ready to roll, God is already rolling! Let's celebrate!"