



SUNDAY SERMON

Three Things

My favorite professor in seminary was a deeply spiritual and intellectually formidable woman, with a Germanic last name: the Rev. Dr. Kate Sonderegger. The last name was fitting, as all the important theologians are German, as I'm sure you know. Kate was imposing — but also very short, and wizened beyond her years. You wouldn't say she was feeble, but she was not physically intimidating. However, her unassuming exterior could not hide—in fact, probably made more evident—the power that lay within.

The running joke on campus was that Kate was rather like Yoda, the little green Jedi master in Star Wars—you underestimated her at your peril. Wielding her intellect like a lightsaber, she would slice through your spiritual nonsense without ever seeming to lift a finger.

Kate was a strict Calvinist—you know, John Calvin, right? The continental reformer, contemporary of Martin Luther, who introduced, or at least developed, such theological concepts as “election” and the misunderstood and much maligned “predestination.” If Calvin had written it in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his massive tome explaining his theology, then that settled it, for Kate at least.

Once, Kate was trying to explain Calvin's concept of election — the idea that God elects some people, but not everybody, to come to know God in this life. Neither the elect nor the non-elect have any choice in the matter — and Calvin argued this way because he believed that human beings simply don't have the power or will, in ourselves, to choose the right path. This part I agree with — that we don't really have the power to choose the right path. We need God's help. But according to Calvin, God chooses to help some people out of this predicament, but not everyone; and why God chooses this person but not that person is a mystery.

I raised my hand to object to the idea that God could be so callous as to elect some, and not others — shouldn't God be electing everybody? And here you may detect that I have universalist tendencies. Anyway, I raised my hand to object, and I brought up this passage that we heard this morning from Luke—how does this election idea square with Jesus' assertion that God is a good parent—if even we know better than to give our child a snake when she needs bread, then surely God realizes that electing some but not others is a bad parenting strategy?

Well, Kate replied, classical theology holds that God is impassable. Now, impassable is a fancy word that means that God is not moved — that, by definition, God cannot be moved — by human suffering. If God could be moved

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PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

by our suffering, then it would make God less than all-powerful and all-knowing, and you see, classical theology depends on the idea that God — in some mysterious way that we can't fully understand — is all of these things. Immutable. Impassable. Omniscient. Omnipotent. Omnipresent. God has to be all of those long theological words for the whole thing to work.

Kate did not concede the point about God's election of some, but not others. But I started to wonder — how did all these ideas get to be at the heart of classical Christian theology in the first place? All of these long words are trying to describe what I saw as an impossible mystery — they're trying to say how God "really is," rather than how we perceive God to be. But I started to think — maybe the best we can hope for is to describe our perception of God, and stop trying to guess at things far above our pay grade.

I have come to think, since leaving seminary, that this shift in focus in Christian theology — from our experience of God, to our theory of God; from heart to head if you will — was primarily motivated by the developing politics of church and state in the first few centuries of Christianity. During this 300 year period, Christianity went from being a tiny but vocal critic of the Roman Empire, to becoming the official state religion of that same Empire.

Contemporary biblical scholars agree that Jesus' central message during his lifetime — that God's Kingdom is at hand — that this message, at its heart, is a message against the Roman Empire. There is a political edge in the prayer that Jesus teaches us in the Gospel this morning: "your kingdom come" is a political statement.

The full line, "your kingdom come on earth," as it is recorded in Matthew, makes the point even clearer. Because if God's kingdom really were to come on earth, then the current king (whoever that is) is going to have to take a hike. Jesus was against the empire, and his anti-imperial rabble-rousing politics are exactly what led the Empire to kill him, in the hope that his message would die with him.

Of course, Jesus' message did not die, but as the centuries wore on, the early church accommodated itself more and more to the values of the surrounding culture. Eventually, as Christianity worked its way up the social ranks, Rome came to tolerate Christians, even to accept them. The Emperor Constantine converted to something that was called Christianity in 312 — after claiming that "the Christian High God" had helped him win a battle. I'm not sure this was the same Jesus that Rome had executed. But nevertheless, by 380, Constantine's successor declared that Christianity was the state religion.

In 386, Augustine of Hippo, who would become the greatest and most influential theologian of the early church, converted to Christianity. He was 32 years old — so for his entire life, a form of Christianity had been embraced by the highest powers in the Empire. Before Augustine converted, he had followed a number of different philosophies, and it is evident in his theology that he brought with him a lot of Greek neo-platonic concepts about God — ideas like how God must be immutable; God must be impassable.

What is lacking in Augustine's theology is the message that seemed so urgent to Jesus himself: a critique of the way in which the Empire dominated and oppressed the lowest members of society. For Augustine, Jesus' preaching about God's kingdom became a message about the

afterlife, rather than an urgent call to build God's kingdom on earth. The God of Augustinian theology is remote, distant—all those fancy words like omnipotent and omniscient, immutable and impassable.

Friends, this does not square with how God is revealed to us in the scriptures. God is not cold and distant, untouched and unmoved by human suffering. In the prayer Jesus teaches in the Gospel today, he calls God "father." Jesus' relationship to God was intimate, and Jesus wants us to have that same close and intimate relationship with God.

Then there are the three central things Jesus teaches us to pray for: God's Kingdom to come on earth; enough bread; and debt forgiveness. All of these are real world concerns.

Praying for God's Kingdom to come on earth is still a challenging message: we owe our loyalty to God, not the kings of this world. Whatever their policies, Jesus teaches us to pray for, and work towards, God's kingdom here on earth, right now.

The second petition: "Give us today our daily bread." We may have enough bread to eat ourselves, but we should resist making "daily bread" into a spiritual metaphor, and remember, every time we pray those words, that there are hungry people in the world right now.

Finally, "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." This is not quite the same as the prayer book version, is it? In Jesus' experience, debt was a tool wielded by the rich to control the poor. Debt was how Rome enslaved little countries like Israel all over its empire. Debt, like bread, might not be a concern for you, but it certainly is for those who struggle to make ends meet. Most of us might more likely be in the position of lender rather than borrower. And the sinning in matters of money is almost always on the lender's side. Forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone indebted to us.

Learn from this prayer. Let it mold your heart. And use the bread from this altar. God gives it freely to strengthen us for the journey ahead, for the work of making bread and justice available to all.

Amen.