

Nice doggie

Hebrews 12:18-29

August 22, 2010

I love my dog.

He is a wonderful companion. Every morning, he watches me back out of the driveway to go to work, and every evening, he eagerly welcomes me at the door when I come home. He follows me around the house, laying down by my feet, or even on my feet, when I sit down.

He likes to go for rides with me in my pickup truck. I open the passenger door, say, "Go for ride," and he jumps up onto the seat. When we run errands, I tell him "Be right back, Bear," and he patiently waits for my return.

He's my best hiking buddy, hiking up to ten miles at a time with me through the woods and up and down mountains in Maine, carrying his own water and snacks in a doggie backpack.

Stoney is a wonderful companion, a constant and loyal friend, always excited to see me, wagging his whole back end with delight, wanting me to notice him and speak to him and pet him. He listens to me. He wants to please me. He goes where I want to go and does what I want to do. All he asks is food and water and a little attention, a little affection, which I am more than happy to give!

I love my dog. Stonington Bear -- that's his full name! -- is the best, the nicest, dog I have ever had. I love my dog.

I love my God. But God is no dog!

I don't keep God on a leash. God doesn't go where I want to go or do what I want to do. God doesn't want to please me; God wants to save me.

God is not loyal, but faithful. God does not stick by me no matter what, like my dog does, but remains faithful to what he is, to what he has said, to what he has promised. God does not just accept me as I am, no matter what, but invites me in -- into life, into fullness of life, into joy, into all I am created to be.

And God is not nice. God is not nice, but good, and nice and good are two very different things. A nice person might ignore your faults and your flaws for the sake of making you happy, but a good person would not. A good person helps you face your faults and your flaws as they are, honestly and bravely, for the sake of making you whole.

Nice is soft and warm and cuddly, but good is ... Well. sometimes good can be downright scary! Just ask the folks who gathered with Moses at the foot of Mount Sinai.

You have not come, as the people of Israel came, to what you can feel, to Mount Sinai with its blazing fire, the darkness and the gloom, the storm, the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of a voice ...

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds his readers of their history, of the story of their ancestors who followed Moses out of Egypt. He reminds them of that awesome, that awe-ful, encounter with God at the base of the mountain in the wilderness. They came near to what they could feel, to sights and sounds that were more than what their senses could process or even bear -- fire and smoke, darkness and thunder and lightning, noises and rumblings and voices.

This was their encounter with the presence of the living God. This was their encounter with goodness. It was like ... No, it was not like anything they had ever experienced. And it is not like anything we have ever experienced or are capable of imagining.

It was a presence that gave only mysterious hints of itself through these terrifying sensory events: the darkness of smoke and the brightness of fire, the piercing sounds like blasting trumpets and the stern warnings not to come near. This is what it was like for the people of Israel to come into the presence of goodness, a goodness that could save them, but that could just as easily consume them, and in some cases, did.

But, says the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, you have not come, as they did, to what you can feel. His readers, and we, have come to a different mountain, not to Mount Sinai, but to Mount Zion, the hill on which Jerusalem is built. We have not even come an earthly mountain or an earthly city, but to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God, a kingdom which has now no geographical boundaries, no physical presence that we can see or touch. And we have come, not to listen to a mysterious voice speaking out of fire and smoke, but to listen to the God who speaks to us in and through Jesus, making to us and to all creation a new promise and showing us a new way.

So, has the God of the new covenant, the God of the New Testament, the God of Jesus Christ, become ... nice? Hardly!

Our God is indeed a destroying fire!

The God who shook the earth on Mount Sinai is the same God who is preparing now to shake not only the earth, but heaven as well! All creation will be sifted and purified in God's consuming fire, and all that is not good, all that is impermanent, will be gone forever.

So do not refuse to listen!

How foolish it was for the people of Israel to refuse to listen to the God who passes judgment on all creation -- a just, fair, righteous judge. But it is all the more foolish now to refuse to listen to the God who offers grace. If you come under judgment, you may always hope for the possibility of mercy, but if you refuse the offer of mercy, what is left? That is why grace is so much more beautiful -- and fearful -- than judgment. It is the expression of God's goodness in its ultimate form, offering us life itself, but how terrible for us if we refuse such an offer!

God is good -- thanks be to God! -- not nice. But sometimes, the God to whom we pray and offer our worship, the God to whom we witness by our words and by our actions, is not much better than nice.

This God is a nice and benevolent power, who makes pretty things and makes people happy and expects everybody to be nice to each other.

This God sets the world into motion and points it in a positive direction, but expects us to take it from here and is happy as long as we are doing our best.

We offer this God a gesture of gratitude in giving what we can spare, a token of our attention by showing up on Sunday mornings once in a while, and a sign of our loyalty by doing something for somebody else now and again, just to be nice.

We sing to this God nice songs that we like. We study this God's word to try to find ways to help us feel better and improve our own lives. We associate in the name of this God with people who are very much like us and who happen to very much like us.

But this God, this nice God, is no God at all! God is not nice. God is ... Well, who is God? What is God like? How should we act and what should we do in the presence of the living God?

Listen! Just listen! Pay attention. Pay close attention, and you will know ...

And worship God in a way that will please him, with reverence and awe. With reverence and awe.

How do we do that?

Do we do it by playing certain kinds of music or by repeating certain kinds of prayers? Do we do it by keeping silence?

Do we do it by building churches with high towers and cavernous interiors and decorating the worship space with icons and emblems and filling the air with candle smoke and incense?

Do we do it by crossing ourselves? By kneeling? By lifting our hands? By bowing our heads?

Yes. All these things are gestures of reverence and awe. But they are simply that, gestures, not reverence and awe themselves. Reverence and awe are matters of the heart.

Very few of the things I mentioned are part of our particular tradition, and I am not suggesting they should be. Reverence and awe are matters of the heart, and if we pay attention to our own hearts, we will know what it means to worship God with reverence and awe.

What it means to come into God's presence eagerly, but with some fear and trembling, too.

What it means to know that God is always more than I can understand, that the ways of worshipping and serving God are never defined or contained by any one tradition, especially our own.

What it means to be on the verge of being shaken, shaken to our core, shaken down to the very foundations of this universe under our feet and over our heads, but to know we will still stand when the shaking is over, because we rest in God's unshakeable kingdom.

*All people that in earth do dwell,
sing out your faith with cheerful voice;
delight in God whose praise you tell,
whose presence calls you to rejoice.*

*Know that there is one God, indeed,
who fashions us without our aid,
who claims us, gives us all we need,
whose tender care will never fade.*

*Enter the sacred gates with praise,
with joy approach the temple walls,
extol and bless our God always
as people whom the Spirit calls.*

*Proclaim again that God is good, (not nice, but good!)
whose mercy is forever sure,
whose truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.*