

The Higher Way

By: Keith Holste

March 3, 2013. Pastor Keith's sermon is about the higher way of thinking that God has, and how Jesus came to be an example of this higher way and show us how to live this higher way.

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We continue to talk about this lesson from the Old Testament, and the one from the New Testament that Jesus gave us in the gospel. We begin in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Years ago I saw a painting, by an artist known to some of you I know, that quoted our lesson from Isaiah today. It talked about "'My ways are not your ways,' says the Lord. 'My ways are higher than your ways. My thoughts are not your thoughts.'" And that's been a favorite verse of mine ever since. I don't remember the details, but I believe the occasion of the picture was that some tragedy had happened in someone's life, and it was done to help this person through this hard time. And I think especially at awful times in people's lives, tragedies or times of untimely death, sometimes we just don't understand it ourselves. We can't figure out why this thing happened. And so we do commend it to trust God, who we believe has a higher wisdom, and trust that God has thoughts that are higher than our thoughts, and a wisdom that's different than our wisdom — that somehow this does make sense to God, who will ultimately take care of us all. I think that's still a useful and valid and comforting way to look at these verses. But I've come to see that there's another way to look at how these show a kind of "higher way" of thinking as well, show the higher ways and the higher thoughts of God. And I think they come through in both the Old Testament lesson today and in what Jesus says in the gospel.

One Bible editor put a caption over these verses of Isaiah 55 saying "An Invitation to an Abundant Life." It invites the listener to come to a place that was never available before — that is, new ways of thinking about how God addresses the world. And it's the beginning of an explanation of what this higher way is. The very beginning of the text says, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come and drink." It's an invitation to everyone. It's a radical idea of who "everyone" is, because in most societies there's a hierarchical structure, and some people who are closer get invitations before others do. Some people are never invited. And certainly in ancient cultures, virtually all of them are hierarchical. And some got the invitations and other ones didn't get the invitations. Here, Isaiah says — and God says to us — *everyone* is invited. If you need water you are invited, and every human being needs water. And he says if you're thirsty come and get it, but you'll be getting wine and milk — the expensive things, not just water — but you'll be getting wine, milk, things like them. He says you use up your life going after bits and scraps here and there to try to survive with, but that's what you strive for. But what I give you is rich and abundant food. So this is the higher way. Everyone is invited, no matter what their status is. What they receive is rich and satisfying, and everyone receives it as a gift.

The way of God that is demonstrated here is a higher way also, because it comes as a one-way, everlasting covenant. Isaiah says when you come and listen to the word and receive this free, abundant life I'm giving to you, he says in so many words: I am promising to you, God says, this isn't just a once-and-forget-it kind of thing and if you ever stray away the deal's off. No, this is an everlasting covenant God makes, he says, just as I made with David I'm making with you. And the promise to David was that he would always have someone from his lineage on the throne. And there were no "ifs" in that covenant; it was just a one-way covenant. God promised there always be someone from your lineage on the throne. God is making a long-term promise here and there are no conditions, no ifs involved. It's

just a promise: I am there for you. And then he further outlines this higher way. This higher way is for all peoples — even peoples they don't know about. They will bring the word to peoples unknown to them. And he says peoples unknown to you will be coming for the word, to hear it. It's for everyone.

The normal way is to kind of keep things close. We usually gravitate towards the groups and the people that we know. We tend to be kind of "cliquey" as human beings. But in the Jewish way, they were usually very particular in those days about not inviting other people in, because they didn't want the things of God to be defiled. And more typical was the response of Jonah. When Jonah was asked to go to Nineveh, he went the other way. That's the more human reaction. "No Lord, I don't want to go to a new place. Let me be comfortable where I am." But that's the lower way, the human response. So we see this higher way of thinking put out here as, he says: go invite everyone no matter where they are. Even if you don't know them, invite them. And so there are several examples already here in Isaiah of this higher way of thinking God has, to invite everyone with no matter to class or wealth. It's a promise made unconditionally to people, not on the basis of whether they deserve it or not, whether they've earned it or not. The promise is there for them, and it is to invite everyone — not just to care about the insiders or the in-group.

So that's what we hear from Isaiah. Now, what do we hear from Jesus? We see how Jesus came to live by this higher way, how Jesus came to be an example of this higher way. And he showed how to live this higher way. Jesus knows that very troubling things happen in the world. In our gospel today, he cites both a mass murder (we could say) that happened in his day, and this tragedy of this tower falling down and killing 18 people in the south side of Jerusalem. So Jesus knows how tragedies and bad things happen to people. Jesus makes an example from these by saying that these men from Galilee — who probably work in a guerrilla warfare band and thought they could come down to Jerusalem and somehow take on the Romans — were put down by the Romans, killed by the Romans. And just to rub it in, Pilate took their blood and mixed it in with the sacrifices in the temple, and just kind of really rubbed it in everybody's face that you're not going to do this anymore. This is a horrible fate for those men though, for this to happen to them. And then Jesus reminds the people of this tragedy that happens with this tower falling down and killing several people.

The common thinking of that day was that how you die is a reflection of how God regards how you live. If you die an untimely death, or if you die a particularly tragic death like happened in these cases, that meant those people were living badly, and God was judging them for their bad lives. And Jesus says no, that's not what it's about. God doesn't send worse death to some and other deaths to others because God wants to punish people because they're living poorly; that's not the way it works. But the point Jesus does make is that these people died, but he says this means all of you need to repent because everybody will die. No matter when they die or how they die, everybody will die. So he says it is for everyone to be repentant and to receive the promise that God makes.

Here again, Jesus begins to show the higher way. The next thing is this parable he tells, the way of patience that God has. God's higher way is to be patient with people, to give the person every opportunity to live in tune with God. The lower way, the sinful human way to handle things, is to require that person, the other person, to live up to our standards of excellence, and to be off with them if they don't live up to those standards. There's little room for less than excellent performance. And the rationale is always there to judge the other person who underperforms. We can be quick, by human standards, to fire someone from their responsibilities if they aren't living up to them, or if things aren't working out — to either send them away walking or to walk away ourselves. We think that being decisive is a justified way to do things. Jesus says there's a higher way. He tells the example of this man then, who has a fig tree, who wants to fire the fig tree right away and be rid of it. He expected it to bear

figs, but it didn't. He told the worker to cut it down, but the worker said no, if I work with it I think it will do better. Let's give it one more year to give it some extra attention. Let's see what will happen. This is the higher way, of having patience and giving another chance. Jesus reflects this in his statement: the higher way of God is to live with patience towards others and to call them to do better, rather than to cut them off right away.

In all of this, Jesus is telling us that God has taken the higher way with each one of us. God could cut us off immediately. God has every right. He could have cut the world off at Adam and Eve. He could have just said that's it, I'm done with this experiment. But he didn't. He was patient with the whole human race. But it's true that all will die. It's a fact. We don't know when. But God is patient with us, but we will all die. That's what we're about since Ash Wednesday, when we put ashes on our head to remind us of that fact. But Jesus tells us yet that amidst this reality of life, there is a higher way. Our God is a God of patience, a God of second chance. Our God receives all, and the covenant of God is everlasting and it is unconditional. So we want to be ready though to receive our God. He calls us to line up our lives and line up our minds so that we are aligned with God and can receive all the grace and mercy that God wants to give us. If we're open to it we'll see it, we'll receive it, we'll live by it.

Well God showed the ultimate higher way, when his love toward us allowed Jesus to be lifted up high on the cross. God's higher way ultimately comes to us in the lifting up of Jesus on the cross for our sake. That ultimate act of love, which was the willingness of Jesus to die, allowed our deaths (deaths that we know are coming) to be covered over, and to be clothed instead with the robe of righteousness and the robe of resurrection. The new life is promised to us because of Jesus, his death, and his resurrection. His being lifted up brings us to a much higher way with God. These deaths of ours which will surely come, as well as those of others, are blanketed by the death and the love and the resurrection of Jesus. We have been given new life.

Because now that our lives have been renewed and been redeemed, God looks to us to live a higher way ourselves. By baptism we've been called to this new life in Christ, to live a higher way than what we were before. In 1 Corinthians Paul says to the people in Corinth, as they were going through some struggles: let me show you a yet more excellent way. That's the last verse of chapter 12. That begins then the great love chapter of chapter 13, a more excellent way to live: the way of love — a higher way to live, that does away with selfishness, does away with vengefulness, and does away with cliques. It's a way of love for one another. God has called us, God has given us life, and we're like fruit trees then, that God has planted that we might bear the fruit of the Spirit. Love is the first of the nine spiritual fruits that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians. God gives us the ability and plants us to produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the fruits we produce as we are rooted in Christ in this new life he gives us. These are the fruits of living the higher way. God has planted us to produce these fruits. Thankfully, God has patience with us and allows us to grow these fruits. When we see these fruits of the Spirit as opportunities for us to live and to serve, we readily make them a part of our ongoing lifestyle. And when we practice them as our way of life, we are demonstrating a higher way. We are showing the way and thought of God — that it is of steadfast love, steadfast promise, loving everyone no matter of status, loving everyone no matter of their origin. We pray that remembering our baptism, we will live by the higher way. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2013, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Keith Holste, Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9, Barren Fig Tree, 1 Corinthians 12:31, 1 Corinthians 13, Gift of Love, 2 Corinthians, Galatians 5:22-23, Fruit of the Spirit