

“A New Thing”

Isaiah 43:16-21 & John 12:1-8

March 21, 2010

I suspect that all of us are careful observers of human nature. I know that I have often been told by individuals that one of their favorite activities is ‘people watching’. I suspect that the reality is that what we really enjoy about ‘people watching’ is simply observing the idiosyncrasies of others in such a way that we might point out either to ourselves or to a friend how crazy ‘some people’ really are. Of course, it is probably safe to suggest that we all judge what is normal and acceptable based on what we would do or how we might act in a particular situation - - anything that would differ from the way we would have done things would make that other person crazy, dumb or an idiot.

I was amazed to listen to a news report this past week about a game show that was being filmed in France. Perhaps you heard about it. The show was being called the ‘Game of Death’. Contestants had to decide to administer an electric shock to another person as a part of the game. Apparently, if a contestant failed to answer a question in a designated period of time, another contestant had to administer an electrical shock ... And each wrong answer forced them to ‘turn up the heat’ With the voltage administered going up to 460 volts. I was busy saying ‘what’s wrong with these people ... Are they all nuts!!!’ and then they revealed that the game show was actually an experiment with actors receiving a fake shock. But still I wondered how it could be possible that one human being could do such a thing to another.

Yep - some people are really nuts. I happened to turn on the TV a few nights ago. The program ‘Deal or No Deal’ was in progress. I left it on to see what the current offer was ... \$ 187,000. That’s a lot of money. Would the contestant take the offer and leave the show or try to get a higher offer. The woman’s husband sat nearby telling her to take the deal. But she decided to take the risk for a higher prize. Was she crazy? That is what I thought. But she moved on and was successful and the offer went up to \$ 299,000. Certainly now she would take the offer - clearly her husband thought she would not risk losing \$ 299,000. But again she said ‘no deal’ and the show continued [after the commercial break]. Don’t you wonder what’s wrong with ‘those people’ - people that just seem to lose their ability to think clearly. Take the \$ 299,000 ... don’t get more greedy. I wonder what the husband really thought as she said no to that much money to gamble one more time? She kept playing until she was down to \$ 25,000. I wonder what the conversation was like between the husband and wife that night?

People are crazy At least those that do what we would not do. Jesus is having a meal with some of His disciples at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. You remember them Mary - the lazy one who lets her sister make all the food and take care of all the work well she sits listening to Jesus. Martha - the one who is troubled and too busy with far too much stuff to take time for Jesus - and here she is fussing in the kitchen again. And Lazarus - it’s a little hard to say anything negative about him - after all he died, got wrapped up and placed in a tomb for 4 days until he was stinky - yet Jesus had him come hopping out of the tomb. You remember these friends of Jesus. They were all there. And now Mary, sensitive, emotion driven Mary, is sneaks up behind Jesus with a jar of perfume that is valued at the equivalent of one whole years

salary - and then beginning to pour it out on the feet of Jesus. I'm not even sure why anyone would even have \$25,000 worth of perfume around the house. These were not rich people. And then there was Judas ... And I don't think we will even go there.....

Can you believe people? They are fun to watch - fun to poke fun at or belittle because they do some of the craziest things. Thankfully, we are not like them. We wouldn't zap someone with high voltage just to win a prize on a game show Would we? We wouldn't get carried away with our own personal greed so as to win more if we already had \$299,000 on the table in front of us Would we? Certainly we would know when to sit quietly to listen to Jesus and when and how extravagantly to respond to Him wouldn't we?

It is interesting to listen closely to the words of the Apostle Paul in our second lesson for this morning. Paul lays his credentials before his readers in a way that is as much as saying, 'if anyone should have it all figured out ... It would have to be me. He describes his whole life as one in which he and his parent had always done the right thing that would have placed him on the path of knowing and being able to do everything right. I bet Paul could have been a great 'people watcher' - ready at any moment to point out the faults of those he observed. But something profound happened to Paul when he encountered Jesus. Suddenly, he found himself looking at himself instead of the other. Suddenly, he was able to recognize that no matter how impressive his resume' might have been, he still fell short and had a ways to go himself. And when he looked at himself instead of others he began to recognize the surpassing value of knowing Christ and the grace of God. And when he truly recognized the amazing nature of God's grace, Paul was compelled to press forward toward the goal of growing in the image of God that heavenly call that is placed on all of us.

It is fun to be an observer of people. At least it is fun until it gets really discouraging seeing the crazy things that those people do. At time I shake my head and say 'what is wrong with people'? At time I just want to become a hermit in some remote part of the world [like rural ND]. I want to think that I have it all figured out. I would never be like Mary or Martha or Judas. I would never be as greedy as the contestants on "Deal or No Deal" never would I deliberately hurt another person like on the "Game of Death". But then I think of the Apostle Paul and by the grace of God I might recognize that I am those people too. By the grace of God I remember that Christ died, not just for the sins of all of those people but for my sins.

This is the heart of our Lenten journey. It is not easy to come to that place where we can stop looking at the failings of others and truly accept that we are in need of that grace and find the strength to respond to the love and forgiveness of God in such a way that we press on toward that heavenly call of allowing our lives to be reshaped by the presence of Christ.

Today our Old Testament text comes to us as good news. It was written to a people that had turned away from life in God and had ended up being enslaved, captive, living in a foreign wilderness. But God came to them with the promise of a new beginning - the promise of streams in the desert and refreshment for His people. The good news is that God comes to do a new thing in the lives of His people - do we perceive it - are we open to it? Will we allow God to do a new thing in our lives or will we insist on suggesting that it is only those people out there that need to change? Streams in the desert that new thing that God wants to do si a good thing. Will we be a part of it?

AMEN