

INTRODUCTION

Today, on this communion Sunday, I'm going to preach about the divine dilemma. All of us know what dilemmas are because we've faced them. They're predicaments in which we want to choose both of two opposing alternatives.

I remember the time that my wife came home from the beauty salon with a different kind of haircut, a permanent I think. It looked all "frizzy." Anyway, she asked me if I liked it and I immediately had a dilemma to solve. I wanted to tell her the truth, I disliked it, and yet not hurt her feelings? But how could I do both? Happily I remembered something a seminary professor once said. When certain, enunciate. When in doubt, mumble. So, that's what I did. I mumbled an honest answer that she couldn't understand and hurried off to let the dogs out.

We've all faced some pretty big dilemmas in our lives but none as big as the one that God faced. He faced the biggest of all dilemmas and you can see what that is and how He solved it in the passage I read, Isaiah 53:4-9. Turn there in your Bible please.

THE DILEMMA

There are two facts that together create the divine dilemma. The first is the badness of man, meaning human beings. We see that in verse 6. This verse is considered a classic statement on the human condition. Notice the penetrating words and phrases it uses to describe that condition: *"All of us have gone astray," "Each of us has turned to his own way,"* and *"the iniquity of us all."* Thomas Harris wrote a best selling book titled *I'm OK, You're OK*. Don't you believe it. I'm not OK and neither are you. The truth is that we're all sinners who have sinned. We're all sinners who have done some really bad things.

Here's a little exercise that illustrates what I mean. You need to do this in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. It can destroy you if you don't. Take a piece of paper and after some honest deliberation, write down the

ten worst things that you've ever done. Then examine those ten things and determine this - what they reveal about the person that you were when you did them. Knowing that it could be much bigger, that list identifies the first fact that helps create the divine dilemma – the badness of man.

The second fact is the goodness of God. It is a fundamental truth of Scripture that God is perfectly and infinitely good. The problem is that His goodness has two opposing demands. The first is love. Because He is love, He wants to forgive all of the bad things we've done. The second demand of His goodness is justice. Because He is just, He must judge and punish all the bad things we've done. That second demand is why C.S. Lewis called God's goodness "the supreme terror of the universe."

Now, put the badness of man and the goodness of God together and what we have is the divine dilemma. God is love and wants to forgive all of our sins. But He's also just and therefore must judge and punish them. So how can He do both? How can He forgive without compromising His justice and judge without frustrating His love?

THE SOLUTION

That is the divine dilemma and Isaiah 53 reveals how God solved it – through substitution. Isaiah 53 may be the greatest prophecy in the Bible. It prophesies the suffering and dying of Jesus on the cross. Notice the terms in which it describes that suffering and dying. Verse 4 – *"Our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried."* Verse 5 – *"He was pierced through for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities."* Verse 8 – *"He was cut off for the transgression of My people to whom the stroke was due."* But verse 6 says it best of all and this is the Bible's classic statement on the subject, *"But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him."*

What we have in these verses is love at its very best. I once visited a woman whose 32 year-old son was dying of cancer. It was a heart-rending scene - he lying there on the couch too weak to speak; she

gently and lovingly stroking his forehead. She began to tear up as we talked and then suddenly uttered one of the most moving statements that I've ever heard. Looking at her son, she sorrowfully declared to him, "*I wish it were me instead of you.*"

That woman's simple statement demonstrates love at its very best. The highest form of love is substitution. When we truly love people who are in crisis or pain, our first impulse is to stand in for them. It's to take their place and suffer what they're suffering so they won't have to.

Well, that's exactly what God did for us. He solved the dilemma, He resolved the tension between His love and justice, by standing in for us. God the Son took our place on the cross. He suffered the pain and shame we should have suffered so that we wouldn't have to. God didn't soften His judgment or condemnation of sin. He just let it fall on Himself instead of us.

We call this "the substitutionary death of Jesus," which is one of the non-negotiable fundamentals of the faith. John Stott explains this fundamental so well in His book *The Cross*. He writes: "*The essence of salvation is God substituting Himself for man . . . God sacrifices Himself for man and puts Himself where only man deserves to be . . . God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.*"

Yes, God was our substitute – and only He could be. Stop for a few seconds and consider the finest person, the most complete human being, that you can think of. For me, it would be Francis of Assisi. Suppose that Francis came back from the dead and said: "*Bobby, let me take care of your sins for you. You've done some really bad things but don't worry about it. I'll take your punishment for you.*" How comforting would that be for me? The answer is "*Not very.*" Why? It's because Francis, like every other human being who ever lived, had the same problem I do. He was a sinner who sinned. Someone who isn't free of sin can't take on himself the sins of another. God's justice wouldn't be satisfied if He punished one sinner for the sins of another.

Our problem is so serious that only a perfect and infinite substitute

could satisfy the demands of divine justice. Jesus, God the Son, was exactly that. Look at the last part of verse 9, "*Because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.*" Jesus was a perfect and infinite person who lived a perfect life. By punishing Him for our sins, God the Father could now forgive them without compromising His justice and judge them without frustrating His love. That is the divine solution to the divine dilemma – the substitution of Jesus for us.

OUR RESPONSE

And what a remarkable solution it is. It's so remarkable in fact, so extravagant in its love, that it demands a response. My question for you this morning is, "*What is that response?*" It's this. Become like Jesus.

If you've been at our church for any period of time, you know what our primary emphasis is. It's Christian spiritual formation, that is, becoming like Jesus in our inner dimensions. It's becoming the kind of person who thinks, feels, and thus acts like Him. Our motto isn't WWJD, what would Jesus do. It's WWJB, what would Jesus be. We major in assisting people to be formed into the image and likeness of Him.

Now, several of you have raised a legitimate question about that. Isn't it really a self-centered thing to be so focused on and concerned about our own personal formation? The answer is that it can be. But it isn't if our motive is to honor the death of Jesus.

Tony Campolo tells one of the most poignant stories I've ever heard. It's about a young lieutenant whose unit was ambushed by the Nazis in World War II. To make a long story short, this young lieutenant saved a wounded soldier but was killed in the process of doing so. He literally gave his life so that this other young man could live.

A year or so later, this young man was back in the States and the parents of the lieutenant wanted to meet him. They wanted to get to know the person for whom their son had died. So they invited him to dinner one night.

Well, it was apparent when he arrived that he was drunk. The

parents tried to make the best of the situation and politely conversed with him as they ate but he was loud and obscene. The dinner grew gradually more uncomfortable and even tense and finally ended when he vomited all over the table. The parents did the best they could to salvage the rest of the evening but weren't really able to do so.

After what seemed like an eternity to them, the young man finally left. The mother closed the door behind him as he did, slumped against the wall, and moaned to her husband these words, ***"To think that our precious son had to die for somebody like that."*** The person that he was, in other words, totally dishonored their son's death.

In contrast to that, the television series *20/20* told the story of a World War II veteran who returned to the grave of the fellow soldier who had died saving his life. This veteran had lived an exemplary life after the war had ended, becoming an outstanding husband, father, citizen, worker, and man. As he visited his rescuers grave, he looked into *20/20's* camera and explained why he had become that. He said: ***"After the war was over, I dedicated myself to honoring this man's death for me. The only way I could do that was by becoming the very best person I could be and by living the very best life I could live."*** The person that he was, in other words, honored his rescuer's death.

Let's go back to the words of the mother, ***"To think that our precious son had to die for somebody like that."*** Let's think about those words in relation to the death of Jesus and us. I ask you what I've been asking myself all week. What kind of "somebody like that" are you. When Father God looks at you, at the person that you are, does He see somebody who honors or dishonors the death of His Son?

Our best response to the death of Jesus is to become like Him. Becoming like Him is what honors it. That is why Christian spiritual formation is our primary emphasis here at Bethel. That's why I spend so much time preaching and teaching about becoming like Jesus in our inner dimensions. It's because what honors His death the most is the kind of somebody that you and I become – somebody who is just like Him.

So let's commit ourselves to becoming that kind of somebody. First, make it your overriding aim in life to become like Jesus. Second, learn what your part in achieving that aim is. Formation into the image and likeness of Jesus is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. But there are things that we have to do beyond reading the Bible, praying, and going to church. Learn what those things are. I will assist you in doing that if you ask me. And finally, third, live out what you learn. Actually do those things that you have to do.

Make and carry out the decision to do those three things. It's the best way I know of to honor the death of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Let's close this morning by using our imaginations. Imagine that God is meeting in heaven with Gabriel, Michael, and the other archangels who serve Him – and that they're meeting about you. They're looking at and talking about what you are and how you are living your life as a result. Father God then points to you as they do and declares, ***"To think that my precious Son had to die for somebody like that!"*** When Father God says that about you and me, is He saying it with regret or joy. What kind of "somebody like that" are you and I? Is it somebody who honors or dishonors the death of Jesus. Become like Him and make it somebody who honors it.