

Proper 28-C: Malachi 3:13-4:2a, 5-6; Psalm 98:5-10; 2 Thess 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Title: The Gospel According to Bully Thurman

Let me begin this morning by telling of the last time I remember being in a pool hall. It was that a group of saints and I were caravanning our way from Jasper to Monroe with all my worldly possessions in a U-Haul truck. I was on my way to be their new Rector and they were kind enough to come pick me up, so to speak. As it happened we wound up in Dawsonville at about lunchtime. And as I had long heard sung the praises of something called the Bully Burger which is served at the Dawsonville Pool Hall... well we just could not resist the opportunity to partake of this famous local fare. So Bully Burgers it was. Now I bring this up because as we ate our lunch we learned the source of the name, Bully Burger.

It turns out that the world famous Bully Burger is named for one Bully Thurman, now deceased, who was a long-time employee of the pool room. Years ago, Bully was the only worker at the pool room during lunchtime. And so it would happen that customers would come in and give Bully their orders. Problem was Bully never wrote anything down. He kept all the orders in his head... which was fine as long as he didn't have too many orders. However, if there was a rush, Bully would forget the orders and regardless of how anyone ordered their burger he would just fix them his way, which with coleslaw, onions, mustard, ketchup, and pickles. You might say that a hamburger with slaw, onions, mustard, ketchup and pickles was Bully's default mode.

So, it got to be that when customers would come in and see that Bully was busy, they would just say, "Well, just give me a Bully Burger. We're gonna get it that way anyway." Thus the Bully Burger was born. And though Bully is no longer with us, his Burger lives on.

Well, I say all that to say that the making of a Bully Burger was, indeed, Bully's default mode. Like certain functions on a computer, which if not given other instructions will perform in a particular way, Bully had a default button that would kick in if he felt overwhelmed.

As human beings, we too tend to have default modes. This is what these texts tend to speak to this morning – overcoming our defaults by way of Christian living. So, let us spend a few minutes speaking of our defaults – defaults which tend to benefit from a little re-programming from time to time. And if re-

programming is in order, we as Christians of course want to look to the Master Programmer as our guide, and that, of course, is Christ.

There was a book a few years ago entitled, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. This could easily have been the title of this little section which appears toward the end of this little book of Malachi from which we read just a moment ago. For this was really the question being addressed by this prophet – why does it seem that good people have to endure hard times? He was giving voice to the question that was on the hearts and minds, if not the lips of the people Israel.

Temple worship was deteriorating. Maintaining the temple had become big business. Thousands of artisans and craftspeople were in its employ not to mention dozens of priests. And there was a constant stream of pilgrims in town who would come to visit the temple, and many moneychangers were needed to convert national currency into temple currency. Temple life had become as commercial as it was sacred. Piety it seems had taken a back seat to enterprise.

And the righteous minority had reverted to their old too human default. In modern English they had taken to whining

“What good does it do to keep the commandments?” they asked. All around us, the arrogant and evil doers, seem to prosper while we go about as mourners. The wicked who put God to the test seem to be doing pretty well while we who are righteous – let me tell you -- are having a tough time just holding on.

It is this group to whom the prophet Malachi is speaking. His is a word of encouragement. In effect he says do not despair. Hang in there. God, he says, knows the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not. And in reality you are all saints -- and you are all sinners.

And so he says you just keep on doing what you are doing. God will sort all of this out in God’s good time and we’ll be all right. “For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings,” says the prophet. This is Old Testament talk for ‘Jesus is coming.’

And, of course, Jesus did come. And when Jesus came he pretty much saw a world not unlike the world in which Malachi had lived several hundred years earlier. A world of people, people who are both and at the same time sinners and saints, struggling to be the best that they can be as best they can. A people trying to love God and love their neighbor -- as best they can discern how one does that.

A people trying to be righteous as best they can discern what that means.

A people sometimes in conflict about how best to go about being pleasing to God and to be about doing the work God has given us to do in this world.

And not unlike Malachi before him, Jesus identified the lack of piety, the commercialism around the Temple in Jerusalem as something of a symbol for all that which had gone awry. And it made Jesus so upset that one day, very uncharacteristically, Jesus storms the Temple, smacks the moneychangers with a stick and turns over their tables. Very un-Jesus like.

But here in this text Jesus is saying something not unlike the prophet who preceded him. Jesus is kind of saying to the people of his day and to us, “Hang in there. In the end, God will sort all of this out. In the meantime, there will be trials and there will be conflict. But in the end ‘not a hair of your head will perish [and] by your endurance you will gain your souls.’”

In the meantime, says Jesus, do not succumb to your default of despair. Do not succumb to your default of fear. Do not succumb to your default of giving up on this Gospel or this church. Hang in there, he says.

But Jesus never *just* says hang in there does he? We have been given tools and we have been given resources – divinely inspired tools and resources – namely Holy Scripture, Holy Church, and Holy Spirit. We are not on our own.

I am reminded of the story where a man, I guess a tourist, was standing too close to the edge of the Grand Canyon, and he slips and falls. But luckily there was scrub bush not too far from where he had fallen and he was able to grab hold of it, thus for the moment saving his life. Yet, he was still in great peril. He was filled with terror. And looking up he shouts, “Is there anyone up there?” And a deep, resonant, unworldly voice comes back, “Yes.”

And so the man screams, “Can you help me?”

And the voice returns saying, “Yes, but do you believe. Are you a man of faith?”

And he replies that yes he believes and he is a man of faith.

And the voice comes back and says, “Good. Then let go of the bush. I will protect you.”

And the man pauses a few moments pondering what he has heard and then shouts back up, “Is there anybody else up there?”

My friends in Christ, there is nobody else up there. God never says “Follow me and it will be easy.” What he does say is, “Follow me and I will be with you.”

My friends in Christ we might be tempted to say that these are hard times. But let me remind that all times are hard times. Charles Dickens in his opening sentence to his classic *A Tale of Two Cities* gave us that it was the best of times and it was the worst of times.

And so these too, like all times, are the best of times and the worst of times. But like at all times - we are not without God-given and God-inspired resources, and we are not without one another.

These texts this morning remind us and encourage us not to succumb to our defaults of either despair, nor disappointment, nor fear, nor cynicism. Nor are we to succumb to our default of depending upon our own resources outside of the help, the hope, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All of these negative ways of thinking and being can become our altar. All of these things can become our idols. These negative and self-defeating ways of thinking and being can lead to places we imagine to be places of peace and refuge when, in fact, they are not. These are not places where God would have us abide.

Dear ones, we all need to do a re-set every once in a while as we remember who and whose we are - children of God.

Jesus says that he is coming back. In the meantime we are to say our prayers, read our Bibles, and worship our God.

And Jesus says in the meantime we are to strive to understand and to live into what it means to be children of God, loving God and loving our neighbor as our ourselves.

And finally, in the meantime, we are to live as a people who understand that it is by God’s grace that we do any of these things, and it is by God’s grace that we have come this far, and it will be God’s grace that will ultimately lead us home.

Amen.