

The Winnowing Fork

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Luke 3:7-14

Joy Piccolo O'Connell heads the Brian Piccolo Foundation. She was also Brian Piccolo's wife and the mother of their three daughters. Piccolo, a running back for the Chicago Bears, was the subject of the movie Brian's Song and the Caucasian half of a pairing with African-American Gale Sayers, the first interracial roommates in the history of the National Football League. The year the Bears made them roomies? 1968. The Piccolo Foundation funds research to combat the cancer that took Brian's life in 1970. In a speech to major donors in 1975, Joy said, "The difference between loving somebody who is deathly ill and being deathly ill is the difference between watching a war movie and getting shot and killed in a war. The one makes you mourn. The other makes you no more."

Biblical scholars believe Zephaniah 3:14-20 seems not to belong with the rest of the book. Zephaniah mostly contains a scathing indictment of the Chosen People's leaders. Written in the midst of a major reform, a sincere attempt by King Josiah to turn his nation toward God, Zephaniah argues the changes are too little, too late. Israel has become complacent and decadent. The Day of the Lord, a terrible delivery of condemnation and punishment, will come and soon. But then these seven verses appear at the conclusion of the book. They promise saving: saving from enemies,

saving from judgment, saving from disease. We know Zephaniah himself suffered from a wasting disease. But he mourned not for himself. He mourned, rather, for the existential threat he perceived his people faced. He had the very real fear they might be no more.

Yet Zephaniah trusted in the Lord's faithfulness to the covenant. After a time of wasting and suffering, the Lord would deliver the people. Other nations might suffer eternal punishment but not the Chosen People. They would enjoy protection from judgment, evil, disaster and oppression—all named threats in our passage. This promise of punishment for one group and salvation for another appears in virtually all the biblical prophets. It appears also in the preaching of John the Baptist. We picked up today in his preaching right where we left off last Sunday. He had just told those who had come out to hear him the ax was already laid to the root, that God was already preparing to cut down those who did not follow God's will. Alarmed, they asked him, "What then must we do?" They and we might have expected him to give some heavy prophetic answer. "Clean up temple worship." Or, "Repent from your sins." But while he must certainly have felt those things were necessary, he answered differently.

In essence, John the Baptist told them, "Take care of the poor." To the despised tax collectors who accepted his baptism, he said, "Collect no more than you ought to." To the soldiers in the crowd he said, "Stop robbing the people just because you have the power to do it." If we accept John as a prophet we must also accept that he spoke

for God. Care for the poor. Deal fairly. Thou shalt not steal. Remember, when an attorney asked Jesus to summarize God's law he more or less said, "Love God unconditionally. And love your neighbor." God must be serious about this! Through the mouths of Zephaniah and the Old Testament prophets, and of John and Jesus, God tells us that true obedience to the law requires that we make the love of God tangible for the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten, the lonely, the alien.

John had one more thing to say, and it takes us full circle back around to judgment. The Promised One who is coming any second now has, "His winnowing fork...in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Those who obey the command to love the last and the least will enter the protection of God's storehouse. Those who disobey will get roasted. This separation of the saved from the condemned, the sheep from the goats, is another widespread biblical theme. Jesus himself spoke of it repeatedly. Perhaps we ought to accept that God really means this, as well. Perhaps we ought to take action on it. Care for the poor. Deal fairly. Do not steal. Welcome the stranger. All the other admonishments in the law apply here as well.

Farmers used winnowing forks to separate the grain from the chaff. Using this tool, shaped much like a yard rake, they would scoop up the dried wheat and toss it up in the air. The grain would fall straight down; the chaff would float around and settle wherever the wind blew it. His hearers understood this perfectly, but as for us, well, the message is, "Don't get blown away." Obey the Lord. Be gathered in.