

Malachi 1:1-14
(John 13:34-35; Ephesians 3:14-21)
“I Have Loved You”

Introduction

Why would we want, in the midst of a long, hot summer, to listen to a brief little prophecy found at the very end of the Old Testament? What could it possibly have to say to us? What has drawn me over the past week or two to this particular book is that its message is so very contemporary. A number of you have commented on how wonderfully contemporary is the message of Habakkuk, the so-called minor prophet whom we studied over the past four Sundays. So I thought that perhaps looking at another of the minor prophets might reinforce the recognition that these too-often neglected final twelve books of the Old Testament bring us a strong word from the Lord, words of challenge, warning and comfort, in the times and places of our lives where we are tempted to doubt God's presence and care for us.

The name, Malachi, means “messenger,” and I have found myself this past week listening to a message from God that explains some of the reasons that we so often fail to experience the fulfillment of his promises to us. The message speaks to us when we think that we are doing what the Lord requires, going through the motions of religion: we are worshipping, giving, serving. To all outward appearances, we are God's people. *Yet we know that something is wrong: we wonder where God is in the midst of it all, why we are not experiencing the great promises of his Word.*

Malachi would be the last word of prophecy spoken by God to Israel for four-and-a-half centuries, a silence unbroken until John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. This final word spoken by Malachi was written after the temple had been rebuilt by the exiles returning from captivity in Babylon, but before the reforms under Ezra. Malachi was laying the foundations on which Ezra's reformation would build.

Here is the key: God's people were disillusioned because they thought they had done all that God required of them, and yet they were experiencing none of the power and glory of the former days of Israel's splendor. What had gone wrong? Did God not love them as he had loved his people in the past? What of his promise that he would return again in splendor to the Temple if only they would rebuild it? Where was his glory? Where was the splendor of being the people of God?

Malachi will explain to God's people why we are not experiencing the reality of the power and presence of God in our lives, in our community and in our culture. His words may sound familiar, but we neglect them to our peril. It is both a solemn warning and a gracious promise, and through it God invites us to put him to the test.

Body

1. The heart of God's message to humanity is simply this: "I have loved you."

God's love is displayed in its particularity, in his compassion toward his chosen people. It is important to understand the meaning of the words, "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated" (vv.2&3). The apostle Paul will later quote this verse (Romans 9:10-13) to prove that God is sovereign in choosing those who are his people, those through whom he will give his gospel to the world. But what are we to make of the idea that the God of love *hates* someone?

Jesus said that he came to reveal the Father: to show us who God is, and what he is like. In Luke's gospel (14:26&27), Jesus makes this arresting statement: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."

To hate, in this covenant sense, does not mean to wish ill or to desire to hurt – it does not even mean to fail to love well. It means that it will not permit any relationship, however close, however natural, however tender, to get in the way of God's purposes. Esau was the oldest and by law was to inherit the blessing. But God's purposes of salvation had chosen Jacob's descendants, and nothing Esau could do would enable him to change God's purposes.

Here is the key: God's purpose in choosing particular people is not to bless them and then withhold his loving kindness from everyone else. It is rather the choosing of his people through whom he will pour out blessing on all the people of the world.

And so, we also see God's love displayed in its universality, in his compassion for the whole world. Malachi will repeat this theme throughout this brief work: "Great is the Lord beyond the borders of Israel!" (1:5). "My name will be great among the nations" (1:11). "My name will be feared among the nations" (1:14). Malachi depicts the mission of God's people as being for the sake of the nations. Whenever we forget that, we begin to presume upon God's love for us, and to lose the experience of his power and glory in our midst. Why does he dwell in power and glory in the midst of his people? For the sake of the glory of his name *among the nations*. Israel had forgotten that, and so have many of us. This was at the heart of Israel's failure to realize God's glory, and is today here in the western church at the heart of the much-lamented absence of spiritual power.

In the rest of this little book, Malachi will spell out the ways that we have turned away from God without even realizing it. He will show us where we need to repent and return to God if we would again be a light to the nations.

- 2. If the heart of God's message is that he loves us, the heart of his warning is this: We will fail to *experience* God's loving kindness if we fail to *cherish* his loving kindness.** In the remaining verses of chapter one, Malachi points out four of these areas where we must make amends.

We have not cherished our relationship with him. What does it mean to value his name? He is "Father" and "Master" (or "Lord").

We have not cherished our offerings to him. Do we bring him our first and best, or our last and least?

We have not cherished our worship of him. Do we delight in our times of worship and look forward to them, or do we find worship a chore and look forward to finishing so that we can get on with our lives? God knows our hearts.

We have not cherished our service of him. "What a burden!" said God's people at the thought of his service. They served him, but it was burdensome. In 1 John 5, John tells us that the final mark of someone who has been born again is that they keep God's commands, *and his commands are not burdensome.*

Where, then are we to begin? How are we to keep from despairing?

- 3. These warnings, solemn as they are, invite us not to miss out on God's promises, promises that call us to recapture our sense of wonder at God's loving kindness, and to let his love for us propel us into mission.**

God has loved us and through us will make his name great among the nations. We must recapture this sense of mission and purpose in the church of Christ: God's purpose in choosing his people is to make us a light to all the nations. His heart is for the whole world and all its ethnic groups. When that becomes our heart, then everything changes: we begin to cherish our relationship with him, especially as it is expressed in our offerings, our worship and our service.

Conclusion

Why would we languish in the foothills of half-hearted obedience, giving him our last and our least, when he calls us to the heights, to know and make known his glory among the nations, to show forth to the lost and broken his loving kindness?

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