

One of the most boring classes in seminary was systematic theology. Actually, I think there is a tie for first with Medieval Church history. And why do they put those classes in the afternoon? In a classroom with lots of windows to see the outside world and to let the warm California sun seep in and lull me to sleep. You know, I used to get this super bitter dark chocolate bar and slowly eat it during the systematic theology and church history lectures. It works. Hopefully no one here has to use dark chocolates to get through this message.

Where was I; oh yes, systematic theology. The idea is that there is a development of salvation history throughout the 66 books of the Bible. The reading from Joshua today is one of those cornerstone lessons. In it, the great leader Joshua tells the Israelites that today is the day for them to choose – will they follow the idols and religions of the people who inhabited the land, or will they follow God Almighty. He says these now famous words: as for me and my family, we will follow the Lord.

If you are wondering where the systematic part is, it comes after that section where the people seem to enthusiastically agree with Joshua and that they too will follow the Lord. Joshua then says: “You cannot serve the Lord, because he is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins.”

He is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your sins.

Except for the “holy” part, does the rest of that passage surprise you? *A jealous God? An unforgiving God?* Does that sound like the God that you know? Systematic theologians would argue that the development of forgiveness and salvation is shown through the rest of the books. Part of that argument is that in John’s Gospel, Jesus says that he will be raised up to save everyone (paraphrased). That sounds good. But, as perhaps a stumbling block to the systematics, we have today’s Gospel lesson which ends with the groom (Jesus) looking through the peephole of door and telling the foolish bridesmaids (the ones who did not bring extra oil for their lamps) that he “does not know them.”

Did you know there is an argument in the Church about this topic? Today, we get to see some of that argument played out.

God is a jealous God. God will not forgive.

Shivers... right? Maybe systematic theology isn’t so boring after all.

Let’s take a look at the Jealous God. I’ve read what some psychologists say about jealousy. It’s wrong if you are jealous about something you don’t own. Take for instance a wife who sees

another woman flirting with her husband. It's okay to be jealous; in this case; because the husband is hers. But, is he?

What we believe is that we are the sheep of God's hand. He is our God and we are his people. The sea is his for he made it and his hands have molded the dry land. We are possessions of God. The trademark, the image, of God is upon us. We are his for he made us. In this sense, God doesn't want us chasing after idols or false gods. Nope, God wants us all to himself.

We are made in God's image. We also have freewill. We also, I believe, are created to worship something. God is not going to make us love him; God is not going to force us to love him. God wants us to make that choice.

Humans worship all sorts of things – sports teams and franchises, gambling, public figures, royalty and much much more. We worship and place our faith into things; like how about superstitions. The cruise ship we went on didn't have a particular numbered floor. It wasn't thirteen; it was an Italian company; but anyway, did they put their faith in the Lord or in a particular superstitious number? That being said, I must admit, I have plenty of my own superstitions. The point is, we need to worship something. And, we have free will.

Does God forgive? Yes. Of course. Jesus taught us to pray: forgive us as we forgive others. Did it take time for us to believe and develop that theology? I'll leave that up to the experts. For me and my family, we will trust and follow the Lord and believe that God forgives.

I'd like to leave you with one more passage from Joshua. After the people enthusiastically said they'll follow the Lord; even after he said God is jealous; he said this: focus on the Lord.

We're made in God's image. We have freewill. We need to worship. And, we are distracted and misled by many things. As we head into Thanksgiving and into the busiest time of the year, let us take Joshua's words to heart – focus on the Lord. Focus your worship on the Lord. Focus your attention, your thanksgivings, your fears and anxieties; focus all of those on the Lord. The Lord will see us through these chaotic and confusing times. The Lord will lead and guide you. And, as we are all called to do, we will worship the Lord our God with all of our heart. At least, for me and my family, this holiday season, we are going to work on focusing on the Lord.