

Sermon

“Regarding Others with Contempt”

A Sermon for First Presbyterian Church

Sunday, October 27, 2019

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psa. 65:0 To the leader. A Psalm of David. A Song.

- 1 Praise is due to you,
O God, in Zion;
and to you shall vows be performed,
- 2 O you who answer prayer!
To you all flesh shall come.
- 3 When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,
you forgive our transgressions.
- 4 Happy are those whom you choose and bring near
to live in your courts.
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,
your holy temple.

*Psa. 65:5 By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,
O God of our salvation;
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas.*

6 *By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.*

7 *You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples.*

8 *Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for
joy.*

*Psa. 65:9 You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;*

- you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.*
- 10 *You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.*
- 11 *You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.*
- 12 *The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,*
- 13 *the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.*

Luke 18:9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

I. The Arch Bishop of Canterbury was in the news this weekend . . .

The Archbishop of Canterbury has warned Boris Johnson and other MPs to avoid using inflammatory language - as the UK prepares for a general election.

Justin Welby said it was "extraordinarily dangerous for politicians to use careless comments" in a

"polarized and volatile" society.

He told the Sunday Times that use of words like "traitor" and "fascist" had left MPs fearing for their lives. The PM had a special responsibility to moderate his language, he added. [BBC News]

A. Even our gentle-neighbor to the North is not immune to these currents of contempt:

VANCOUVER (NEWS 1130) – Looking at the political map of Canada today, it is divided along some very hard lines.

Canadians have come out of the federal election polarized. Urban islands of Liberal red have been separated by a sea of Tory blue from the B.C. Interior to Manitoba, all while neighbouring the Bloc Quebecois resurgence in the east. [CityNews]

B. And I probably need not explicate the sorry state of political rhetoric which occupies the legislative and executive branches of the US Government with people from both sides making comments about their political rivals that they:

- 1. Hate America**
- 2. Are the enemies of democracy/ the people**

C. We should not give a pass to the church either:

- 1. In 2012, I was at the General Assembly, when we were still in the throws of some bitter theological arguments and I listened sadly as advocates on both sides impugned the character and the authenticity of the discipleship of others with whom they**

disagreed.

2. **The contempt was palpable and very hard to witness.**

D. Many of you know of my fondness for the writing of C.S. Lewis and among his works one of particular relevance which I have read and re-read numerous times since I first encountered it in college.

1. **The *Screwtape Letters* were originally published weekly in the Anglican periodical *The Guardian*, in **wartime** between May and November 1941**

2. **In Letter Seven Screwtape writes to Wormwood:**

I had not forgotten my promise to consider whether we should make the patient an extreme patriot or an extreme pacifist. All extremes, except extreme devotion to the Enemy, are to be encouraged. Not always, of course, but at this period. Some ages are lukewarm and complacent, and then it is our business to soothe them yet faster asleep. Other ages, of which the present is one, are unbalanced and prone to faction, and it is our business to inflame them.

Lewis, C. S.. *The Screwtape Letters* (p. 32).
HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

3. **It would seem that Screwtape and Wormwood are alive and well in our age — and up to their old tricks of inflaming us to polarized factions.**

II. Today’s parable from the Gospel According to Luke begins . . .

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:”

- A. Let us be as honest with ourselves as we dare today**
 - 1. Who hasn’t felt the peculiar glee that comes from self-satisfied judgment of our neighbor?**
 - 2. We wouldn’t be prone to self-righteousness if it were not so much fun!**
 - 3. And once the habit of comparing ourselves to others takes root . . . it is a hard weed to remove from the soil of our hearts.**
- B. Two people, Jesus tells us, come before God...**

- 1. One —**

was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

- 2. The other —**

would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

- 3. And then as if he was afraid we’d miss the point Jesus concludes —**

I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

III. Once again the strange world of the Bible introduces a divine irony —

all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

- A. The world of the Bible is a place where things are**

topsy-turvy.

- 1. The weak are strong**
- 2. The rich are sent empty away**
- 3. The proud are humbled**
- 4. The humble are exalted**

IV. It really is hard to let go of our desire to judge

- A. Indeed, that is the sin of the garden of Eden — we wanted to “be like God, knowing good and evil.”**
- B. Against this pervasive instinct to see ourselves as good and others as flawed there is a long history of wisdom within our faith that teaches us to stop.**

A brother asked an elder: “How does reverence before God get into a person?” The elder said: “When a person lives in humility and simplicity, and refuses to judge others - that is how reverence of God gets into them.”

From Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*

“Where is there a person who does not with instinctive sureness find the spot where he can stand and defend himself. . . for which he will fight with all the drive of his instinct of self-assertion?

It is the struggle of the natural man for self-justification. he finds it only in comparing himself with others, in condemning and judging others.”

“Self-justification and judging others go together, as justification by grace and serving others go together.”

p. 91

V. Bonhoeffer has hit the nail on the head

- A. When we prefer to behold others with contempt**

we are living a life of self-justification.

B. But when we recognize that *all* of us are justified by God's *grace* we are set free to stop criticizing our neighbors and faulting them — and start serving them and loving them as God loves them.

C. Perhaps this is why the apostle Paul writes:

2Cor. 5:16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

1. We are entrusted with the noble work of being ambassadors of God's reconciliation!

2. And if Paul is to be trusted — *we* are reconciled to God by emulating God who

was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

VI. So, I have been trying to watch my own behavior in recent days and I am appalled at how often I engage in conversations of incredulous judgment of others . . .

A. Which makes me think that this habit highlighted

- in Jesus' parable is a tough habit to break.
- B. To change such an entrenched habit we will need simple disciplines which are easily remembered.**
 - C. Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* provides one I will be adopting and which I commend to you too.**

“Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words. . . This it must be the decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him.”

- D. In the days ahead whenever I am prone to engage in self-justifying and neighbor-condemning speech . . . I'm going to try very hard to:**
refuse to allow [those thoughts] to be expressed in words. . .

VII. Our age is an age in which Screwtape and Wormwood and their fellow minions are busily enflaming us further

. . .

- A. It is time for those of us who know a better way to opt-out of the polarizing and dehumanizing rhetoric of the current age and**
- B. Join God in the holy work of reconciliation.**
- C. If we will be content to let God be the judge of good and evil . . .**
- D. If we will be honest enough to see our own faults...**
- E. We will enter into the joy of giving thanks that God “does not count our trespasses against us” —**
- F. *Then* we can learn to love others as we have been loved.**

Charge and Blessing:

(My favorite singer-songwriter, David Wilcox, *Underneath*)

“I know that compassion is all out of fashion and anger is all the rage...”

Let us leave this place having heard the call to replace:

† **our anger with compassion**

† **our self-righteousness with honesty**

† **our pride with humility**

. . . that we learn to stop

Trusting in ourselves that we are righteous and regarding others with contempt.

Because Life is short and we only have so much time to encourage those with whom we share this journey.

So let us be quick to love

Let us make haste to be kind . . .