

Sermon: Year C, Trinity Sunday

Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8

Revelation 4:1-11

John 16:5-15

If the Gospel read this morning had been taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the original Greek text would have been rendered in a fairly tepid translation. The eighth through eleventh verses would have been read in this way: “And when [the Counselor] comes, he will *convince* the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you will see me no more; concerning judgment, because the ruler of the world is judged.”

The text that was read, however, was taken from the New Revised Standard Version, which offers us a very different rendition. This, direct in contrast, is what we heard: “And when [the Counselor] comes, he will *prove the world wrong* concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: [wrong] concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; [wrong] concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you will see me no more; [wrong] concerning judgment, because the ruler of the world is judged.” Sometimes small decisions in translation shift the whole thrust of a passage.

The Greek word used by John has several variations in meaning. Most commonly it meant to rebuke or reprove. Sometimes, however, and interestingly, it also meant to shed light upon or to open – which sets a completely opposite tone. The translators of the Revised Standard Version, faced with this broad division between reproach, on one hand, and illumination on the other, seemed to have tried to split the difference. To convince seems like a good compromise, rebuke softened by enlightenment.

The translators of the New Revised Standard Version, however, chose a more startling translation. Instead of compromise, blending black and white into a duller shade of gray, they chose to emphasize the tension that exists between the two meanings. Only by seeing what is black are we able to recognize the stark beauty of what is white: and thus, only by being convicted and rebuffed will we be able to turn around and claim a very new and exciting freedom. This, it seems to me, is the more genuine rendering of John’s text, more in keeping with the tenor of his Gospel. All the more, this is news that all of us need to hear and need to ingest. It’s critical to our own time, when our world seems to be splintering into ever more polarized factions. But, most especially, these verses are critical because they may be the Gospel passage least understood and least observed by many Christians today, much to the detriment of Christianity, woefully compromising us and sullyng our witness and our message. Here, specifically, we must pay acute attention.

Listen to this again, because it is directed at us: Jesus said that the mark of the Holy Spirit would be our own conviction that it is we who are wrong, and we are wrong about these specific things: we are wrong about sin, wrong about righteousness, wrong about judgment. We are wrong, Jesus said, in regard to the very things about which we generally feel most right, and this deserves a bit of reflection. For Jesus didn’t claim that we are wrong about facts, that we had, for example, somehow miscalculated how far Saturn is from the Sun, or had misplaced a digit in calculating pi, or hadn’t yet discovered the periodic chart of elements. He didn’t say that our problem was misinformation or confusion or simple befuddlement. In regard to these things, we seem quite able, after a time, to get things right. We reason together and argue and demonstrate to one another how we have uncovered and understood our world. In this realm we have made steady and often astonishing progress.

There remain, however, many spaces in human life and relations where facts and proof have little effect. We all know the experience of standing face to face with someone in conflict, stymied by our inability to reason our way to resolutions. No matter how much is discussed or debated, the other person remains inscrutable. We are mystified, not by lack of knowledge, which we may have in reams, but by the sheer presence of someone else whose stance defies all our powers of description. Nothing said and no force of reason results in progress. The problem isn't being incorrect about objective matters; often it's believing, in comparison with the person we are facing, that we are subjectively superior and the other, therefore, is the one who is culpable, or despicable, or, ultimately, damnable. We are existentially right. And this, then, is especially exaggerated when we firmly believe that we are not alone in this assurance but are standing with God, and God is standing with us.

Yet precisely here, the Gospel interjects: with pointed force, Jesus disrupts our deepest confidences. We are wrong about these very things: we are wrong about sin, he said, which, in the context of his own death and resurrection, means that the divisions we suffer are false; we are wrong about righteousness, which means that the divisions we most proudly maintain are unjustified; and we are wrong about judgment, which means that we have illegitimately closed God off from others, when what God offers is light, and not the intensification of our own darkness.

This needs to be bluntly expanded upon, because so many claims made by Christians today defy Jesus' words. What we have been told here includes all of the following.

- We are wrong if we believe that the central issue of faith is whether we will be saved or damned by God.
- We are wrong if we believe that the fracture of the world must be maintained eternally by the fracture dividing heaven and hell.
- We are wrong if we believe that what is right can only be upheld by force of punishment and that, apart from the threat of penalty all our moral structures will fail.
- We are wrong if we insist that the world can only be made right by someone's condemnation and that there is a price that must be paid for the injury of sin.
- We are wrong if we believe that justice requires that we withhold forgiveness, especially when the harm done is grievous.
- We are wrong in our desire to think better of ourselves by thinking worse of others.

This, in reply, was Jesus' declaration.

- In so far as we still divide ourselves by reference to sin, we limit or deny that Jesus was God's own complete overcoming of our estrangement.
- In so far as we divide ourselves by reference to righteousness, we forget that the very person damned by us and forsaken by God and delivered to hell was the person raised by God on our behalf, who has been given the throne of heaven.
- In so far as we draw any lines of separation weighted by eternal judgment, we refuse the victory that God has already achieved. The one who first divided the world has been defeated. Division itself has been condemned.

At every turn, in response to every term of severance, God has replied with openness and embrace. No dark corners persist. His light will pervade everywhere. Our rebuke is this supreme dominance of grace – a grace that has no definable limits.

This is such an indefatigable love that we, still, and sadly, find reason to debate and deny it, here or there, in regard to him or her, countering the Gospel by leveraging redemption on the requirement that first we must be right, refusing reconciliation because being in communion with those we dislike or disapprove of is far more frightening to us than banishing them. But God himself has dispelled the ultimacy of the claim of right and wrong.

This division is no longer primary, upheld at last by the very strength of God, for its dissolution is the substance of the very life of God.

This is the Church's core testimony: the Father himself condemned the Son in order to raise him up beyond all judgment to the place of highest communion; and the Spirit opens this intimacy of God to us, offering it freely, without a trace of lasting anxiety. We need never again look over our shoulder in fear of God. We need never raise any fear in others by means of God's name. The breach of sin, in the eyes of God, has been repaired. The breach of judgment has been closed by Christ's cross and resurrection. The breach of righteousness held up in opposition against others has been undone. And we may participate in the life of God in so far as we dispense with these divisions too.

Emmanuel Levinas once remarked that love is a "difficult freedom." That's as good a description as any I've found. When we are so driven by difference in the world – driven to spite, to violence, driven even as a church to schism by means of debate over orthodoxy, these verses from John must be reclaimed. We do not preach sin. We do not preach righteousness. We do not preach judgment. We preach Christ crucified, and these divisions died with him, not to be resurrected.

The final words of Jesus' address to his disciples provide us our footing. He finished with this assurance: "I have said these things to you so that, in me, you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." This is our news, always and above every division: "be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world."

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