

Sermon: Year C, Proper 28  
Texts: Malachi 3:13-4:2a, 5-6  
II Thessalonians 3:6-13  
Luke 21:5-19

This past Wednesday, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released a statement in which they declared that church members must heed the directives of the church when they vote in public elections. Roman Catholics, they explained, are required to vote according to their Christian conscience and convictions, and furthermore, their failure to do so might result in their “formal cooperation in grave evil.” Church members were also then advised to seek information on political candidates only from sources explicitly approved by the church.

This alone would have been pronouncement enough. But the Bishops did not leave the issue there. As soon as this command was given, it was accompanied by their stern warning that those who did not follow their instruction would put themselves in danger (and I quote) “of losing their eternal salvation.”

I don't know what kind of response is ultimately appropriate to such a statement. I don't know why what the Bible unambiguously calls Gospel must be so consistently and drearily transformed by the church into dark threat. I don't know whether to be bemused or depressed or furious seeing such deformation of Christian faith. But this dangling of Damocles' sword must stop. I had to work hard on Thursday to restrain myself from playing Martin Luther all over again, if even to pound one thesis onto the door of the woefully institutionalized church.

Perhaps being an Episcopalian I have become too polite to register my disagreement so directly. But I have enough Reformed blood in me to say, within these walls, that I must stand otherwise and I must stand elsewhere, so help me God I can do no other. I have no interest in promulgating such threats, nor do I have any patience with how they are used to manipulate either persons or, dare I say, even more egregiously, the witness of Scripture. I mean to be respectful, not impertinent. But for too long it has been too expedient to swing Christianity like a big stick, by which we have beaten and bruised too many to number. When all the while our calling is really to speak as God has chosen to speak to us, with a small voice made all the more compelling by its confident softness, a voice which accomplishes most when others, purely out of desire, wish to bend down to hear us.

In that humility, then, let it be said, that our eternal salvation is not our business. It is not up to me to save someone else's soul. It's not up to me to save my own soul. This is strictly God's work, and, as history too readily attests, our every avid attempt at this task has resulted chiefly in violence. It's not up to us to save souls because, in truth, our souls are not our own. We don't possess them, nor do we own them. We cannot win them... We cannot lose them either.

Our souls are more intimate to us than our bodies or our minds or anything else that composes our identity. They are who we are irreducibly, when everything else is stripped

away – all masquerade, all falsehood, and, we are inclined to add, all the limits of our finitude. The soul is that specific sense of us, experienced and profound, that evokes the eternal, and as such, our souls *are* the very mystery of our relation with God, who alone is immortal, who alone gives life. Thus, our souls, which are so intrinsically us, have no strict location. They aren't resident within us or subject to our decision. More accurately, they're about us. They're who we prove to be when shown in God's light.

Here is the irony of the self. We cannot see our own soul, but others, looking at us, can see its trace. We cannot know our own soul, but others, dealing with us, can discern its character. We cannot singly draw the dimensions of our own life and effects; only others can provide us a true picture of ourselves. And yet, we persist in the insistence that we are all independent, self-made, self-contained persons who can, quite blithely, determine our own destiny – for better or worse, for now and for forever. We believe that we can choose our end because we assume that we are our own masters – even for all eternity. Our lives are in our hands, the very ones that pull the levers at the polls. The right choice means reward. The wrong choice, and we consign ourselves to condemnation... Well, false!

The last line of the Gospel reading from Luke is illuminative. Jesus says that it is by “enduring that we will gain our souls.” These precise words are important. According to Jesus, our souls are not hung in the balance between right and wrong. They are, rather, he said, revealed according to the degree that we are able to endure, which, in this context, means our capacity to be vulnerable before others. Jesus has just described a time of enormous tumult and persecution, the kind of suffering that occurs when looking after one's self becomes the primary objective of everyone. (There's no hell like rampant autocracy, the tyranny of the self maximally multiplied.) But salvation doesn't come into this horror by means of winning and defeating. It comes, instead, by practicing an openness that dissolves conflict rather than masters it. “Don't worry about what to say when you are dragged before the authorities,” Jesus instructed. “Let me speak on your behalf.” Which could be rendered: Let God mind your soul – for no matter what happens – no matter what happens – not a hair of your head will perish.

The consequence of this kind of endurance Jesus described as gain, not triumph. To gain our souls does not mean that we will be among the privileged few who earn their place in heaven. It means, altogether differently, that we will come to understand with clarity and depth exactly what the real substance of our soul is. For by enduring we will be laid bare, open to view, and thereby we will be recognized as persons who are essentially and undeniably dependent, people who are utterly in need of the grace of others.

But this is no less than the root truth of our lives. We are, because God has chosen to make his own soul manifest in us. Our lives are themselves signs of the endurance of God's own grace. And, thus, to admit this, to act in accordance with this trust, to endure as God endures, is to show that the world and all life is sheer gift. To gain one's soul is to radiate in our own flesh and blood the beauty of this, God's own unceasing, unflagging generosity. It is to give evidence in our own demeanor of such promise and covenant,

attached to us, that there is no room for threat, there is no room for fear and worry, there is no room for speculation or condemnation.

There is only, ever, the forward movement of grace to grace, even in the face of grave evil. It is this expectation and movement that is the Gospel, the Gospel uncompromised, the Gospel that admits no exception, and the Gospel that is subject to no diminishment, whatsoever. For this Gospel I stand. For this Gospel I will speak. For this Gospel, I hope we all can live. For this Gospel. Lean forward, I'll say this softly: for this Gospel.

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