

Sermon: Year C, Proper 17  
Texts: Ecclesiasticus 10:7-18  
Hebrews 13:1-8  
Luke 14:1, 7-14

Karl Barth, one of the most famous theologians of the past century, once noted of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the most famous theologian of the century before him, that he “played Scripture like a Stradivarius.” He said this with utmost admiration. In Schleiermacher’s hands the Biblical texts, which otherwise might seem dry or arcane, became the finest music, perfectly gorgeous. The problem with this, however, as Barth then declared, is that it is not properly our place to play Scripture – for in truth – it is Scripture that plays us. Our responsibility is not to try to make the Biblical texts attractive by means of our own eloquence, spinning inspiring visions. What is asked of us is that we listen closely enough to the texts so that we may realize a different and marvelous music arising from our own lives.

With this in mind, I’d like to ask for your patience this morning. The texts we have heard don’t lend themselves to entrancing expositions built of soaring rhetoric (the kind of sermons that people like to rave about). Rather, I feel constrained to begin with a fairly didactic set of remarks – important clarifications. I hope, though, that if you stay with me through this somewhat mundane work, what will emerge for all of us will be, actually, the music of God, and this music sounded from within our own lives.

Allow me, then, a few direct and unadorned statements.

At the end of the passage read from Hebrews, the writer concludes with an exclamation unlike all that preceded it. After offering a number of instructions regarding how we should treat one another, the writer added this declaration: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” The shift in topic is so abrupt that it feels like a complete non sequitor, and it’s easy to pass right over this statement without thinking about it, moving right on again to more practical and, shall I say, less religious matters. But this singular pronouncement is of critical importance. Ignoring it proves disastrous. Understanding it opens up the whole of God’s Kingdom. What, then, was meant by this? What is its value?

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” This is the writer’s affirmation that Jesus is the eternal and infinite revelation of the very heart of God. In him we may see the entire judgment of God made clear, timeless with respect to history, boundless in scope and embrace. The judgment of God is the generosity of the whole of creation, that, once spoken, is not abandoned but, in Jesus, is stubbornly held in covenant. The judgment of God is the compassion of God’s own incarnation, God’s choosing to be with us not only in our life but also in our own death, the death we suffer and, in Jesus, the death we impose. The judgment of God is God’s glory made brilliant in Jesus’ resurrection and, in this, God’s reconciliation with the world. Here is God’s determination that eternal life should overcome the dark finiteness of our death, the sad finiteness of our love and the horrible pettiness of our own judgments.

This constant triumph of God’s creating and redeeming is God’s every word to us, in Jesus made explicit and human. What Jesus accomplished was not piecemeal or partial or made available only to those who believe or to those who obey or to those who repent with enough fervor. He was and is the comprehensive and conclusive manifestation of the will of God, for us and for the world, without exception. Jesus Christ is the same. Who he was before is who he is now and who he will be, without variation, without division. Jesus shows us who God is. Jesus shows us who we are – persons intimately tied to God. In him all truth and beauty and goodness unite. He bears witness to the destiny of all things, and in him we

are shown that God's sole and repeated judgment is exclusively God's grace, given without qualifications and without limit.

Our temptation is to retreat from the grandeur of this revelation, and in place of God's judgment we lodge our own. By our own measure, forgiveness cannot be unconditional without its being abused. Therefore, wiser minds insist that penalties must also be exacted. By our own measure, finding fault and assigning accountability are integral to our lives. Therefore, wiser minds demand that division is essential. Some must lose if others win. Some must suffer for others to rejoice. Reward is meaningless apart from punishment. There can be no real redemption without damnation. And then more subtly, by our own measure, it is extraordinarily doubtful that God would be so singularly named and made present in our flesh. We live in a world of multiple religions. It is dangerous to put so much emphasis on one person, one tradition, one defined covenant. It leads only to competition and woeful violence. Therefore, more enlightened minds suggest that Jesus was only a prophet, of the highest order but still less than God. He was an example, perhaps without equal, but no more than human. He was a gifted teacher, blessed with unequalled insight, a martyr who displayed honorable passivity in the face of raging mobs. He is worthy of emulation. But, we are often told by wiser minds, he is just one among many, and peace will come only when God and life and death and eternity remain questions that we can't quite dismiss and also cannot answer. Jesus, they say, means a lot of different things across the span of history, and therefore he isn't ever the same.

All these reductions, however, ultimately undermine the very peace that God so wants us to enjoy. Under their influence, we are left, on one hand, to struggle vainly in a world where injustice continues to reign, the world so sharply defined by the writer of Ecclesiasticus, rife with insolence and greed, illness and decay, where eventually everything falls to resignation and death succeeds. And all our efforts fundamentally change little. Or, on the other hand, we make religion itself only an ugly human contest, speculating who is chosen and who is not, who merits God's favor and who is left out. We make faith the chief instigator of fear and fear the chief instrument of our own desires and manipulations.

And what is largely dismissed as impossible, then, on both counts, are the very instructions set forth in the book of Hebrews. Nice ideals, they are quickly assessed as unreasonable. Showing hospitality to strangers is risky. We don't look for angels in others. We're afraid of predators. Those who are in prison... deserve to be there. Torture is a good thing if it keeps us safe. The right to the maximization of happiness is regularly judged more important than vows of marriage or fidelity. Money, we all know, is the very engine of well-being, and being ambitious is far more profitable than being content. Here, in every judgment, we turn in upon ourselves. Our reduction of God to the limits of our own wisdom makes our world finite and our community tenuous and our own lives all the smaller.

Yet, precisely here, immediately after setting down his instructions, the writer of Hebrews set this interjection. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Jesus is the eternal and infinite judgment of God. The destiny of all creation is set in redemption, and our own lives have already been resituated within God's eternity. There are no unsettled conditions. God has claimed us. We need not be afraid. And therefore, it is possible for us to live now within the abundance of God's grace.

We don't have to fear that our lives might be made smaller or poorer or less impressive by the love we choose to show. Such measures have no bearing before God. We can welcome strangers, hopeful for angels; we can show such compassion for others that it overwhelms our natural resentments and suspicions. We can transform happiness from its usual sense of transient pleasure to the complex joy of fidelity itself. Money and acquisition are not nearly as meaningful as trust in community and gratitude shared. And faith is not a hard and

thankless task, an imposition against our desires. It is no less than the opportunity, given to us, to make God's peace available in our own openness and generosity.

The saints are not simply those who proved more diligent in attending to the commands of God. They are persons who, with particular poignancy, lived without fear for themselves and thereby revealed to others the perfect beauty of the judgment of God, revealed in Jesus Christ.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Over the course of this past week, I struggled repeatedly with this line. It is enormously difficult to find words and expressions that adequately convey what this one statement means. But then, to be able to do this would be to play the text like a Stradivarius, when, all the while, the text is supposed to play us.

This line should be our constant prayer – not a petition bent to our judgments but such a judgment on our behalf that our lives themselves, under its sway, may sound a most glorious music.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen