

Sermon: Year A, 6 Easter

Texts: Acts 17:55-60

I Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

One of the hazards of ministry is that public speaking generally results in public critique. If someone presumes to preach, you can bet that – whether solicited or unsolicited, directly or indirectly – some feedback will be given. In this regard, I have heard many remarks about many preachers, and it is fascinating to me that in a lifetime of listening closely to what people say, I have never once, not once, heard anyone declare that a sermon was disappointingly too short. They can be too much of almost anything else: too simple, too religious, too erudite, too abstract, too political, too brash, too sentimental. They can even, on occasion, be too long. But brevity seems never to be a problem. Like cleanliness, it seems to lie right next to godliness.

Which is odd, if indeed, what is brought to consideration in a sermon is the Word of God and news about life and death, promise and salvation, the possibility of hope and the potential for undiminished joy. Why are we not more naturally enthralled about these things? Why are we not more hungry, or curious, or thoughtful, or patient. Or is it that, somehow, God bores us – especially because there are at least ten or fifteen other more immediate matters that cloud our attentions and close our hearts?

What we like to hear about most, if we are going to listen, is ourselves – we want to hear something personal, something practical, something that seems instantly relevant or excitingly trendy. In our ceaselessly marketed age, we've nearly perfected this singular focus – "it's all about me." But this is nothing new. Two thousand years ago, when Paul stood up before the Athenians, they expected exactly the same kind of address. So he drew his audience in by talking about them, which he did in glowing terms. They were, he said, clearly wise and cultured. They didn't need any false gods or cheap idols. Their faith wasn't rooted in bad magic or flimsy superstition. They spoke of God as the broad and deep mystery of their lives, as a humbling sense of holiness that arises from conscious reflection and studied care. Paul said this was impressive. And he had no qualms about flattering them.

But he also then made the classic preacher's mistake. In his excitement, he went on too long. Suffering unstoppable inspiration, at the last moment he switched the topic from talk about the people themselves... to specific talk about God. It was as if, suddenly, everything fell flat. There was no longer much interest in what he said. Listening turned to mockery. He had gone too far. Talk of personal enlightenment is always welcome, but to speak of God, and to speak of God in proper or distinct terms, to declare God's judgment, to proclaim God's resurrection, this was simply beyond the pale – it was speech that was neither interesting nor credible. So said many of the Athenians.

Two thousand years later, we are not much different from them. For the most part, God is still relegated by us to that ill-defined fog of the purely mysterious or, in our preferred modern jargon, the casually spiritual. Which is convenient because it doesn't interfere with our own measure of the world. God is useful, but usually in the most abstract ways. A refuge of last resort, we reference God as one who, somehow, at far distance, ultimately upholds what is right

and what is wrong. God is the final arbiter of what is fair and just. Thus, in the end, we trust that God will mete out what everyone objectively deserves.

Paul Tillich called God the ground of all being. It's a definition that leads more toward tortured thinking than to prayer or worship. But this is acceptable too because we like to believe that we can work out our own lives, independently. We may stand on the ground, but we are grounded by our own two feet. And only when crises come do we make an exception and fervently ask for and expect more from God.

In general, our tacit assumption is that God – and especially the God of the resurrection – can wait. God can wait, in fact, until after we die. Other issues are more pressing: global warming, adequate health care, third-world debt, world-wide hunger, the depletion of oil reserves, political tyranny, and, not least, terrorism and the poisonous fear it instills. We want and seek solutions to these immediate problems before we turn, at the last, as if resigning, to a savior who, when eventually we die, hopefully, at the end, will rescue us.

Paul's whole point, however, was that the resurrection, by the grace of God, is both the most immediate and the most enduring fact of our world and our life. It determines everything, and apart from it, nothing amounts to much of anything. All the mystery of God is collected and focused, he claimed, in this singular event, which, he said, announced the entire judgment of God – a judgment that has been set against all persons throughout all time. By it, God has overturned the world. As the defeat of death, it is God's reclamation of all of creation. Once having been accomplished in Jesus, once spoken, there is nothing that remains untouched, in this life, in this time, in all our ways. Paul would insist that all our enlightenment, however impressive, is still a form of myopia, of tragic short-sightedness, which can be corrected only by the news of Jesus and of resurrection as the root truth of our world.

According to Paul, the resurrection means that death has no power, neither individually nor universally, both in terms of our physical dying and in terms of the enormous influence that dying and ending and failing wields in the midst of our living. Individually it means that our life is secured by God, and not just the bare fact of our existing or the floating off at death of some sort of ethereal, eternal spirit. What God secures is our whole personhood, all who we are and all who we have been. It is the retrieval and redemption of every moment of our time, of our world, of our selves. This infinite embrace is God's judgment, and nothing else.

And if this is the case, then fear is false, a sad and dangerous seduction. It is death's creeping back into our lives. The persistent message of the angels begins always with the same salutation: "Don't be afraid." God is with us. God is for us.

And if this is the case, then in place of fear we may realize joy and move forward in hope. We may live with confidence and the deep satisfaction of an abundance that is not just material, but is moral and relational as well. Sin will not prevail. Betrayal will not endure. Abandonment does not succeed, for love, by God's judgment extends across all divides, even to our enemies.

As a universal decree, resurrection means that God hallows our time and our world in its very present moment. It is God's emphatic reiteration of the words that described the finishing of

creation. This is very good. This – we – are that to which God has given his very life. And therefore we are urged to do the same, seeing a world not in need of solutions or a fix, but a world that yearns, all the more, for our own love, our own deep investment of ourselves for (as we say in the frailest of terms) the common good. It is the resurrection that provides us total freedom to do this, without regard first to who is most deserving or who has the greatest standing or who is the most in need or who will best be able to repay our own kindness. Resurrection is not a conditional reward. It is a generosity that has no limit, and therefore makes no distinctions. Here we are all equal. Here in the eyes of God who resurrects. Here, then, we can begin to bring this absolute equality to light, not begrudgingly as a responsibility but as the glad opportunity of every day. And the Sabbath becomes the time set apart for our wholesale rejoicing, by prayer and worship, in the expansiveness of community, reveling in the triumph of God and the waning of all dying.

In comparison, our vaunted enlightenment seems a bit shallow and weak and even the esteemed Sunday edition of the New York Time appears to be tired words and the same old news – rearranged without redemption...

But if it is God's judgment in Jesus' resurrection that is truly preached on Sundays, then, perhaps, our constant critique as we leave will become this, no matter who speaks: the sermon was too short. I would have liked to listen to that news a bit longer.

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