

Sermon: Year A, Proper 8

Texts: Jeremiah 28:5-9

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

A most interesting line suddenly popped up in the Epistle reading this morning. I don't know if it caught your attention, but it's one of those small asides that, quite apart from its seemingly innocent appearance, warrants a good deal of attention. Paul seems to be well on his way marching down the standard path of moral instruction, drawing out the implications of sin and law and wickedness and death – religious talk. Just what you came to church to hear – or, at least, that's what many who want nothing to do with Christianity suppose. It's all about threats and penalties, commands and rules, narrow gates and a terribly vindictive God. And yet, suddenly, in the very midst of this, Paul interrupts himself, and he interjects a statement that seems almost like a disclaimer. He warns: "I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations."

Well what does that mean? What limitations? And what are human terms? And how does this simple line effect the broader scope of Paul's message?

In order to respond to these questions, I'm afraid I need to ask for your indulgence. If you can bear with me and traverse through some dusty, old background material, I think that we all might be rewarded – and maybe even surprised – by what this single claim suggests. And we might find it extraordinarily timely with regard to many of the issues we face today.

So allow me to start with two rather dry footnotes, two names. The first is Plato, who is famous for many things, including establishing much of the foundation of Western civilization. One of his major contentions was that the world can be conceived as consisting of three ideal forms. These are the true, the good, and the beautiful. In accordance with these, we seek knowledge, try to discern what is ethical, and enjoy what is lovely.

The second historical footnote involves the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who, two thousand years after Plato, refined these categories and reset them in distinctly modern form. Kant postulated that the first work of reason had to be determining what was true. He clearly privileged this category. For, if we could understand reason itself and, subsequently, what is true, then we would be able to decide once and for all, and indubitably, what is good as well. Ethics depends on sure knowledge. And then, lastly, in good German fashion, once we've fully settled these matters, we will finally be able to relax a bit and take some pleasure in what is beautiful.

More than most of us ever suspect, we are heirs of these two thinkers. We live in a world thoroughly formed by Kant's thought. Truth is king. This is what gives science its predominance in our time. It's verifiable. It's objective. And our own hopes are pinned on the same conviction that Kant voiced: if only we can map out what is true, then all the rest will follow. If we figure out the world materially, we will then have a fix for all that plagues us.

The problem we encounter with this conviction is that it breeds religious fundamentalism too. Some Christians, of the very same mindset, insist that the Bible must be read without any

amendment or exception as God's own truth through and through, a divine truth that trumps even what we can see and test and prove to be otherwise. And the stakes are high here, because if we take just one step away from this absolute claim, the verdict must fall that, if not true, then parts of the Bible must be false – which means it cannot be trusted, which means that God is imperfect, which means that God is a meaningless, or worse, a dangerous, illusion. Which cannot be allowed.

This distinctly unhelpful language should be familiar to you. When truth is given absolute priority, we become primed for violence. There are fewer and fewer shades of gray, and disagreements finally culminate in stand-offs where one must lose for the other to win. Evolution must be countered by creationism. Moral differences must be framed by exaggerations of right and wrong and met by judgments of condemnation. And, in all the battle, what is beautiful is reduced to a frivolous pastime. Look around; the greatest wounds in our world can usually be traced back to our demands that we are fighting for truth. The very category that was supposed to put everything right is often the source of our meanest conflicts. Which leads us back to Paul, because Paul understood sin in precisely this sense. What we most trust on our own, most betrays us.

One way to read Paul's letter, the portion we have heard this morning, is to study it as a moral compass that, although convoluted, will tell us what we should do and how we should act in order to earn God's favor. This is Paul the heavy, who informs us that the sword of God is wavering above our heads. It is also a way of reading that simply passes by Paul's strange interjection.

But I need to stop where he pauses, because this one line is able to recast all the rest of what Paul proclaims. The central plea of his letter is that we try to comprehend the full measure of God's grace given us in Jesus Christ, a stupendous freedom that has been granted us apart from any deserving. What Paul struggles to provide us is a vision of this wholesale mercy, and he knows what our objection will be and how ardently we will press it. Such forgiveness doesn't fit in a world drawn in black and white, where what is right and what is wrong must be vividly discernable. It doesn't allow us the satisfaction or the security of determining who should remain and who should be banished. Repeatedly, in reply to God's gift of reconciliation, we turn again to instances of sin and law and judgment that we are loathe to give up. It is as if we are trapped by the very language, as if what is true can only be maintained against something else, that must be rejected and cast out. The language of grace flummoxes us. We don't know what to do with it or how we can live by it. It is too broad, too hospitable, altogether too open. Here's the rub: it seems to make all of us beautiful in the eyes of God – and that just can't be true – or good.

Paul's one line, if we really listen to it, however, seems to signal a wonderful reversal. It just may be that the beautiful takes precedence, not against the truth but expanding it. It may be that what he hoped for from his elaborate and sometimes torturous reasoning was our decision to learn a whole new way of perceiving the world. For what would happen if we could give priority in our faith and in our lives to beauty first. What would that mean for us? What would happen if we felt, intensely, that our worship was the experience of divine beauty, if we understood our stewardship not as an obligation but as acts of pure enhancement. What would happen if community was the result of desire rather than tacit agreements, if all our disagreements were

tempered and overwhelmed by the beauty of love that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.” What would happen if our first thoughts in the morning were turned to the majesty of God’s creation, itself waking to a new day. What would happen if every night, as darkness fell, we literally stopped to be amazed at everything that had been given us during the day. Truth has afforded us very little peace. Beauty accomplishes it far more effectively.

I have never heard someone, when asked about Christianity, reply that they marvel at its beauty. By all our complaints and condemnations, even amongst ourselves, we are becoming a scourge more than a blessing. Imagine what it might be like if, instead, seeing us, others eagerly wanted to share something of the same grace.

I chose to become an Episcopalian twenty-three years ago when, on a Sunday of no particular relevance, I plunked down at the communion rail. As I put out my hands, I glanced across the way. Maybe twenty others were there doing the same thing. We were all very different people leading very different lives. None of us knew what the rest thought or the nature of our moral commitments or the specifics of our individual creeds. Yet together, we were all reaching for God. The simple beauty of this amazed me – surprised me. And that beauty impressed me as the core truth of God, which I wanted and needed.

No one outside our walls wants or needs our rightness – though sometimes it seems this is all we talk about, if we say anything at all about religion. What we all long for is God’s righteousness, which is the beauty of grace first, which establishes communion, which makes us whole. That’s Paul. That’s Christianity. Hopefully, that’s us, too.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen