

Episcopal Church of the Resurrection
Centerville, Utah

November 20, 2011
The Rev. Steven C. Andersen

YEAR A, Proper 29, Christ the King (RCL)
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Psalm 100, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

JUDGMENT

I want to start by letting you know that Bishop Scott has begun to haunt my preaching. And maybe not in a bad way. Here's the way that happens. Every Wednesday, we have our staff meeting. And we begin each week with an hour of prayer and worship. The biggest part of our time is spent in contemplating and discussing the gospel lesson for the coming Sunday. Now there are two things I have learned about our Bishop's thoughts about preaching. The first is that he believes pretty strongly that the Sunday morning sermon should be about the day's gospel, not one of the other readings. One Wednesday, he asked me how I would approach a sermon on that week's gospel. And I said I would prefer to work with the Old Testament reading that week. And that's the day I found out his pretty firm desire for preaching on the gospel on Sunday. The second thing we do on Wednesdays when we are exploring the gospel is quite common. We start by identifying the hard parts of the lesson. Those things that grab our attention, or make us uncomfortable, or are hard to understand. I don't always do that in my preaching either.

Now let me say, the role of the preacher is to spend time, in prayer and contemplation, and let the spirit direct what ends up as the Sunday sermon. Nobody, especially the Bishop, would have it any other way.

The low hanging fruit in today's gospel, is how we can serve God. We are serving God, we are caring for Jesus, when we care for others; clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty. Conversely, we are ignoring God, we are blind to God, when we fail to care for others. God has given us so much – all that we have actually. We can't properly thank God, and are in no position to return the favor. What we can do, is to do for others – all others. God is in them, and in serving them, we serve God. This is a good teaching. It is helpful, valuable and practical. But I couldn't go there. There is something daunting in the middle of today's gospel, that I couldn't ignore. Especially hearing that little voice in my head, that sounds suspiciously like Bishop Hayashi.

At its core, this reading is about judgment. God's judgment of us. This gospel says that we will be judged, by what we have done, and by what we have not done. Those judged worthy will be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. The others will be judged as accursed, and sent into eternal fire and eternal punishment. When we stand before God, and he renders his judgment, it will not be a happy ending for everyone. And this is where I ventured this week.

Let me begin at the ending – a conclusion about judgment. The word I would use is consequences. I very much believe that our decisions and actions matter, and that consequences are the result. Big, bad decisions are often followed by big, bad consequences. We see this at work everywhere in our daily lives. There is no reason to think this principal is not at play in matters of spirit

and soul as well. As a matter of fact we already know that. If the practice of prayer was always worthless, we would quit trying. Conversely, if our sinfulness, our acts of hurt to others, didn't cause us that twinge of remorse and guilt, we wouldn't care. No, we know that what we do to and for others matters – that it has an impact – and that consequences will result. But we may not realize just how much our choices matter.

When I consider judgment, I have to say I am not so sure that I see God sitting behind a modern judge's bench, hearing the evidence, and rendering a verdict. Rather, again along the lines of inherent consequences, the judgment flows from our actions. We do it to ourselves. When I choose to not take care of my health, my judgment is illness and disability. When I choose to be unloving and unlikeable, my judgment is estrangement and loneliness. God doesn't do these things to us. Our judgments are our own, a consequence of our choices. And this judgment thing works in both directions. Anyone who does an act of kindness will tell you, that they received more than they gave. More grace, more love, more fulfillment of life. It works just the opposite of how you might think. Your experience is probably like mine. The best moments in our days and in our lives are when we are giving or doing something that truly matters. It pumps adrenaline straight into our souls. For those of you who participate in our community dinners, have you noticed something? People don't just come to eat, and take their fill. Although that is ostensibly the purpose. Increasingly, they help with the cleanup. Or they chase down the donation basket, needing to

contribute. There is something much more than dinner going on here. And that is what Jesus is pointing to in today's gospel lesson. Giving food to the hungry. Giving drink to the thirsty. Welcoming the stranger. Clothing the naked. Visiting the sick and the prisoners. These are not inconvenient social tasks to perform. They are not even good works to earn the admiration of others. And they are really not brownie points to get to heaven. These are ways to feed our own souls, and in so doing bring us closer to God. What a cosmic irony! We are not so much doing for others as we are doing for ourselves!

Now about eternal consequences. Heaven and hell. I am not sure about the details of heaven and hell. But it seems to me that these are just the logical conclusions of our chosen life paths. If one lives a life of hate and anger, a life without love, without compassion or without welcoming, it will continually shrink the soul, that part of us that responds to God, and the needs of others. Given enough time, perhaps our soul dies, and the essence of our life, now and forever dies too. Conversely, when we feed our souls, when we pursue those things that give meaning to our lives, our souls grow, and we are transformed. Who knows? Perhaps heaven awaits us just behind our next act of Godly love.

I do not know much about the next life. Frankly, I am often mystified by this life. But I have a pretty good notion about heaven and hell. I do know that heaven and hell are not just some other place, for some time in the future. You can get a good look at both the hellish and the heavenly right here on earth.

Perhaps the eternal heaven and hell are simply extensions of the heavenly and hellish on earth. And it may not matter. It seems to me that we pursue the heavenly and fight the hellish on earth, and let God take care of the eternal consequences. As I considered our life path choices, and how we are ironically filled by our emptying, I kept coming back to the Prayer of Saint Francis, which I will close with this morning.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen