

October 23, 2016
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 25, Year C, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Joel 2:23-32
Psalm 65
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

Last Wednesday, I was the celebrant and homilist for the Day School morning chapel service. Afterwards, while greeting the older kids as they filed out, I asked them for ideas for my Halloween costume. I got nothing. As usual, several sixth-graders stayed behind to tidy up, and so I repeated my question to them. After a few moments, a sixth-grade boy looked at me, his face lit up as if a light bulb had switched on in his head. "You should dress up like God," he said excitedly. As I laughed at his suggestion, he added, "You can go around pointing at kids and telling them what they're doing wrong." He offered a physical demonstration: "Don't eat that candy bar! That candy bar is bad for you!" I laughed even more, and pictured my costume: long white robe, fake white hair and beard, walking staff, and accusatorily pointed index finger.

As the day wore on, I thought about that brief exchange with the sixth-grader. It was a lot less funny by lunchtime, when I was feeling kind of *sad* about it. The image of God as judgmental old man in the sky is the one I grew up with. It has been 43 years since I was eleven years old, and apparently that image is still alive and well. Even if that sixth-grader wasn't thinking *old* and *man*, he was surely thinking *judgmental*.

By the way, if you need another example, just before the service I was in my office about to print this sermon. Jakki noticed, tacked to the bulletin board across the hall, a drawing by one of our younger Sunday School children. It depicts God leaning over a cloud and saying, "They're bowing in the wrong direction!!! I'll just throw meteors!" Yes, it's funny, but not.

Clearly, we still need to push back against that sort of thinking. In doing so, today's Gospel reading might at first seem to provide little help. It begins with this: "Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" We can tell right from the start that Jesus is going to call someone to account. He goes on in the parable to contrast the *self-righteous* Pharisee and the *self-effacing* tax collector. As the parable turns out, the worldly relative status of these two men is reversed in God's eyes.

This parable reflects the recurring theme unique to Luke's Gospel: God's upending of the social order. This theme is present in two other parables we've heard in the last month: the parable in which in death the poverty-stricken Lazarus goes to Abraham, while the rich man who ignored him goes to Hades; and the parable about the relatively powerless widow who harasses the unjust judge until she attains justice. This theme of social order disruption also underlies the recently-heard story of Jesus' healing of the ten lepers, in which the only one who demonstrates gratitude is the sole "foreign" Samaritan. Status reversal is also found in what might be the most oft-quoted passage of Luke, the portion we call "The Magnificat." Located right up front in Chapter 1, this oration by the pregnant Mary, mother of Jesus, includes the following:

[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.¹

Luke's Gospel is a clarion call of caution to those who enjoy society's privilege; it is one of hope to those who live at society's margins. Luke's most disturbing illustrations come from the parables, which purposely employ evocative rhetoric as a means of capturing the hearer's attention. Taken as a whole, what we learn from Luke's Gospel is the understanding that God's priorities are not our priorities; that God's society looks little like our society. God's concern is for *all* God's people. As a person of privilege, maybe I'm kidding myself. Still, it seems to me, despite the rhetoric, that in God's abundantly redeemed world, we will all end up beyond the need for either self-righteousness or self-debasement. I wonder if this helps us shift our image of God from one of judgment to one that's something else.

Back in May, on Trinity Sunday, I preached about how we name the three persons of the Trinity, and about naming God ultimately as *love*. Last Sunday, Carolyn Sharp gave a powerful sermon about our covenant with God, a covenant that urges us to love others, as God profoundly loves us.

God is love. God loves us. But here's the question: Do we really *believe* that? Beyond simple belief, do we *know* it? Do we know it in the depths of our minds, our souls, and our bodies? Do we know it so deeply that we are able to witness to God's love, to those who need it most?

For every one of us, the answer may very well be, It's complicated. For me, and maybe for you, my *knowing* waxes and wanes like the phases of the moon. Sometimes it's like the peace of a landscape illuminated silver by a full moon on a warm and cloudless night. But other times it's more like the approach of the winter solstice, when the new moon coincides with a disturbingly chill and inky darkness.

The God of judgment is seldom helpful and can be especially problematic in times of darkness. The God of judgment is suspicious of us humans, and therefore suspicious of what God created and named good. Fear of judgment and suspicion instill feelings of guilt and shame and unworthiness. Those feelings of guilt and shame and unworthiness are blocks to intimate relationship with God. And they can't help but spill over into other aspects of life.

Maybe I'm simply describing my own experience, but I think it's one that many of you share. For those of you fortunate to have had a different experience, let me generalize by saying that a person's conception of God affects their relationship with God. By extension, their conception of God affects their relationships with others, and even their relationship with their very self. Depending on your particular situation, you might welcome some Godly corrective. If so, it's a corrective for your own sake, and for the sake of the world that Jesus calls *you* to help heal.

On the path to that corrective, let's notice something. The focus on the judgmental God is, at its center, a focus on the afterlife. It's about individual behavior that often has little to do with anyone else; it's about following the rules in order to get into heaven. In contrast, our aim in this post-Christian setting is to respond to Jesus's call to walk the path of discipleship in this life. In this life, you and I were created by God, in the image of God, to be in relationship with God. God is not waiting for you or me to mess up so that God can judge us. If the hospitality of Jesus is any indication, God is open and waiting, luring us to Godself, accepting us however we arrive, and helping us extend our love for God, to love for others.

On Thursday, I went to the Institute of Sacred Music for a lecture by one of my seminary liturgy professors, someone who had great influence on me. Lizette Larson-Miller spoke about the concept of *sacramentality*. I'll paraphrase and summarize her definition of sacramentality this way: sacramentality asserts that the Triune God: is Creator of all that is; interacts with creation; desires an ongoing relationship with creation; and is, above all, love. Creation or matter is created good by God, and helps humans engage in a participatory relationship with God. God's life fills the world; the world participates in God and allows us to encounter God.² Lizette went on offer this from former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams: "Sacramentality is not a general principle that the world is full of 'sacredness': it is the very specific conviction that the world is full of the life of a God whose nature is known in Christ and the Spirit."³

During the lecture, Lizette talked about God luring us into relationship, and after the lecture I asked her about the mechanism by which God does that. She said that sees it in as being all about the medieval concept of *desire*.⁴ While it was a prominent theme for medieval mystics, we seldom hear the word *desire* in church. But maybe we should. The idea is that God draws us to Godself in much the way we are mysteriously attracted to, and as a result seek total union with, a human lover. This is a very different image than the one of the judgmental old man in the sky. It may be something that is worth reclaiming, as we seek to proclaim anew the goodness of all creation, a creation that includes our own embodied selves.

God is in relationship with us, even when we fear that God is not. During the Eucharistic prayer, the celebrant touches the bread and each vessel of wine as a sign of the coming of God's transforming Holy Spirit. Maybe we should perceive it also as a symbol of the loving touch that God places on us from birth to death and beyond, a touch that has the power to instill in us the desire for union with the One source of all.

Notes

¹ Luke 1:52-53, NRSV.

² Lizette Larson-Miller, in her handout for the lecture "Renewing Sacramentality: A Sacramental Worldview and Liturgical Roots and Wings," The Kavanagh Lecture, Yale Institute of Sacred Music, October 20, 2016, and attributed to her book *Sacramentality Renewed: Contemporary Conversations in Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016).

³ Rowan Williams, foreword to *The Gestures of God: Explorations in Sacramentality*, Geoffrey Rowell & Christine Hall, eds. (London: Continuum, 2004), xiii.

⁴ Conversation with Lizette Larson-Miller, October 20, 2016.