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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.35 No.41

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

09/05/04

Casting Out the Beam

The other day, while reading an editorial in a newspaper, which happened to be about a moral concern, I found myself asking the question, "What is the standard?" Why did this particular moral offense warrant such scrutiny when so many other heinous ones are neglected or even approved of?

And then it occurred to me that in this respect the popular news media is no different than we as individuals or than we as the institution of the Episcopal Church. The media merely represent the opinions of our culture writ large whether "liberal" or "conservative." We are fortunate in Savannah that these editorials are usually well reasoned and help to stimulate the conscience of the community. But they remain, in their fundamental assumptions, opinions.

The truth is that neither the news media, nor we as individuals, nor we as the institution of the Episcopal Church, holds any inherent authority based solely on our opinions. And so if our opinions are to mean anything, they must become more than the shadows of images in the depths of Plato's cave. They must become rational judgments with some authority other than our own.

In his Sermon on the Mount, our Lord gives us the boundaries of judgment. He begins by saying, "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again."

Jesus warns us first of all not to judge. But what does he mean? We might imagine that what Jesus is saying is simply another expression of the golden rule. "Do not be judgmental, and people won't be judgmental of you." No doubt, the hypercritical and judgmental soul will reap what it sows, but is this all that Jesus means? Does he mean that we should make no judgments at all? In that case we would cease being moral agents. Not to judge at all would remove all discrimination of what is good and evil, right and wrong.

No, the sense of what Jesus means is this: Stop your incessant judging. And beware. The standard you use to judge others, God will use on you on the Day of Judgment when your conscience will be laid open before him. He will apply your standard, as well as his, to you. And the truth is that you will not stand up either to your own standard or to his.

So then, the prohibition to judgment does not eliminate moral discrimination as such, but something else. Jesus is telling us to stop what are essentially arbitrary and private judgments – moral opinions. These are the judgments that arise out of our own pride and therefore tend to be hypercritical and myopic.

He continues. "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and behold a beam is in thine own eye." The arbitrariness of our private judgment is seen in the fact that we tend to point out the mote, the smallest particle, of what we object to in the life of another, while we ignore, we do not even see, the beam, the huge, blatant, sin that is ours. And so Jesus shows us the logical and spiritual difficulty of an arbitrary judgment through the image of the mote and the beam. How can we see well enough to remove the mote that is another's eye, when our own sight is obstructed by a beam? It cannot be done. You cannot see the objective moral truth as long as your private judgment gets in the way.

And so Jesus says: "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." Jesus does not eliminate the act of judging. He makes necessary an objective judgment. As he says in John's Gospel, "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment." (7:24).

"First cast out the beam out of thine own eye." Begin with self-examination, says our Lord. This is itself impossible without a standard above us. "And then shalt thou see clearly." Once true self-examination takes place, then one can judge clearly, without an arbitrary or private judgment. The beam is gone, and the mote can be seen. The measure is the same for all. Of course, how one does this is as important as the doing of it. To be right without being good, to offer criticism without the intention of charity, is nothing worth.

And so we are left with the standard which for the Christian can only be that which God reveals. If we are to know false prophets by their fruits, and if we are to build the house of our soul on solid rock, we must know the teaching of Christ Jesus, the Word of God Incarnate, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. When it comes to our own self-examination, to the judgment of others, or of society or of the Church, the measure is not arbitrary. What is right and good is of God, inviolable and absolute.

In the present climate of our culture and our institutional church, arbitrary and hypercritical judgment is everywhere. It is like the pollution that fills the air of Chatham County. It is there and we live in it. Sometimes we forget about it, until the stench reminds us how unhealthy the air actually is.

In the end the highest notions of pluralism will not help us here. Objective moral truth must be the measure for our judgments. That is why Jesus warned us to cast out the beam. Left to our own devices, the high notion of pluralism degenerates into personal prejudice.

And while we might turn to Confucius or Buddha or Mohammed for an objective measure of moral life, we would do better to turn to Moses

and then to him about whom Moses wrote, the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone is the Incarnation of God. The wisdom of wise men derives no doubt from God's gifts, but they are only partial. Jesus is himself the Lord, and his moral life the perfection of what it means to be human. We call on him to help us cast out the beam, to live by his truth, and in his charity. And oh, how we need it.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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