

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.36 No.28

The Third Sunday after Trinity

06/12/05

ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE (II)

Jesus' parable (of Dives and Lazarus) treats love as a form of being, a mode of knowledge.

First of all, his story says there is a difference between good and bad, right and wrong, and that this difference has to do with what is true and what is false. It is a difference that works not only for a moment, in this world, but forever. Speaking in religious terms, this is the difference between heaven and hell. The acts of love or of refusal of love make a permanent difference because there is something about love that lasts and persists beyond the moment. Your reward will be what you love. You will get what you think you want. And you will in fact go to the place where your own heart and its desires lead you. There is a grim word from St. Peter about this when he speaks of Judas Iscariot: "that he might go to his own place."

Second, Jesus' parable recognizes how hard our hearts really are. "If you say you love God, you do well; but do you love your brother also?" There is no question in Jesus' story about what loving God means. In this case it means taking care of Lazarus, the sick beggar. Loving God means doing what is pleasing to God, whose property is "always to have mercy." And since no lover has ever wanted anything except to please the beloved, to act so as to please God will also please yourself. Even more, since the love with which we love God and all His creatures, including ourselves, has its source in God, therefore when we act out this love we bring ourselves into a union of mind, heart, and will with God, and begin to be blessed. Not to do so is to curse ourselves, or, in terms of this particular story, to send ourselves to hell.

Third, and finally, this parable shows us that the fatal egalitarianism of the Golden Rule ("do unto others") is worthless without a standard. This standard cannot be our sense of our own deserts. The standard is, in the New Testament and for anyone remotely professing himself to be a Christian, the person of Christ himself, in his words and in his works. Jesus shows us what it means to do unto others. He embodies for us the nature of what is to be done, and by giving us himself as the definition he shows us how to do not only for others but for ourselves at the same time. The rule becomes golden only in relation to the character of the person whose rule it is. St. Paul says: "we have the mind of Christ." Only insofar as one's moral sensibilities and ethical imagination are fed from this source is the Golden Rule a responsible guide to conduct.

Jesus' story not only sweeps aside a lot of the moral rubbish we accumulate around ourselves. It goes on to assert two very positive things, both of them shocking.

His story assumes the idea of rewards and punishments. Jesus simply indicates without arguing about it that good will be rewarded and evil punished, and there is a clear warning that the consequences of our actions are final. In other words, "virtue is not necessarily its own reward," and "vice will not escape punishment."

One of the greatest of eighteenth century Christians used to break down at the end of the Te Deum: "let me never be confounded." And when someone asked Dr. Samuel Johnson why he was so disturbed and what he meant by "confounded," he replied: "I mean sent to Hell, sir, and punished everlastingly." He knew that love does something for me and that it does something to me. So does the refusal of love, or the distortion of love. Love is always dangerous, and the risk is unavoidable. You can't get away from it, and the possibilities are fearful. Perfect love casts our fear, but sometimes (not always) it is only the fear of what I may lose or the hope of what I may gain that keeps me doing what love commands.

There is no such thing as completely disinterested, purely selfless love. That "concept" is the most destructive and pernicious of all abstractions about love. If anyone ever tells you, "I just love you for yourself alone," look out! I dare say we will never know the best there is of God or our neighbor if we love God and our neighbor for what we can get out of them. On the other hand we must love God and our neighbor because it is best for us that we do. Happiness comes from such love. To live without such love is to go to Hell, to close the possibility of communion with all kinds of reality, to fix a great gulf between ourselves and the good. It is the selfishness which invites loneliness in this world and separation from God in the next.

Francesca tells Dante and Virgil: "Love absolves no one beloved from loving." This can be turned into terrible self-deception, as indeed it was by the person who speaks these words in the Inferno. It is, like the "golden rule", another of those abstractions, valid only in terms of a concrete standard of reference.

(to be continued)

Reprinted from 1983

The Rev'd. William H. Ralston, Jr.

send this

bookmark

print

close

Report Errors | Comments

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.