

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

by the Rev'd John Crews

Epistle Rom. viii. 18., *Gospel* St. Luke vi. 36.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

In the film, 'Conan the Barbarian,' the titular hero is asked, 'what is best in life?' and the screenwriter, John Milius, has our protagonist respond by cribbing from Genghis Khan: 'to crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and hear the lamentations of their women'. A fine answer if all that were to this reality was this material existence, that all that ever was or will be is the stuff around us and all that mattered was how much of it belonged to us. Of course, even if that were the case, such an answer can only satisfy one strong enough to have the hope of achieving it, and that only for the short amount of time allotted before strength begins to wane, faculties dull, and like the great Khan, himself, wind up falling off your horse and die in misery.

But that *isn't* all there is to reality. We all know it. Even those who reject God struggle, sometimes valiantly, to establish *some* basis for right and wrong, justice, love, and happiness. And there's a reason for that, one that Paul touches on in today's epistle. For if the whole world groaneth, we ourselves groan, for we are built out of its stuff, we are witnesses as we are not only made from its stuff but also creatures of spirit, a part of us uncontained by it, and because of our disobedience, as corrupted image-bearers of God, we always possess a dim awareness of our guilt as its cause. Deep within our very being, we know that the world is beautiful and wonderful, and yet at the same time violent and cruel. Something instinctively tells us that it is right to shield the freshly hatched sea turtles from the clutches of the seabirds as they make their way back to the sea, even after learning that the seabird may wind up dead because it couldn't feed. It may be the law of the jungle, but it just doesn't feel right.

And something deep inside beckons us to fight this wrongness, to stand against it, and to destroy it. Like creation itself, our inclinations, while noble, are still poisoned by sinful natures. Because while our detestation at wrongness is commendable, our disordered desire to be loved is too easily twisted into a need for recognition and approval. It is not enough that we fight for righteousness, our fight must be acknowledged and even that we be celebrated as righteous ourselves.

Which brings us to today's Gospel lesson wherein Jesus speaks to our tendency to be merciless judges of others while blind to our own guilt.

Not all of us like to possess judgment. To be a good judge of character is something we'd be pretty proud to possess and its lack is something to be lamented. On the other hand, no one wants to be judged. Even the innocent man, when brought before the bar, feels a bit queasy under the looming glare of a magistrate. That feeling comes from a real place and that is an intrinsic attribute of judgment. For judgment entails a certain level of uncertainty. Let me give you an illustration. Suppose it's been raining, and you need to cross the street and the gutter is flooded. If the water was only standing in the gutter, you know you could take one big step and clear the puddle. But suppose it's been raining for a while, and the water is backed up into the street. You know you can't make it over the puddle with just one step but maybe with a little jump? How big a jump? Do you need to take a couple of steps? Maybe pick up a little speed? Will my feet slip? All these thought processes are what we refer to as 'judgment'. In other words, judgment requires a leap. It is taking some data and extrapolating from it a conclusion. A person with good judgment can make a good determination, either make it across the puddle, or decide to cross elsewhere (which is what we call discernment, by the way). While a person with poor judgment ends up with a soggy sock, in the end both of them make it to the other side of the street without certainty regarding the outcome.

Got it, judging is bad... except... Jesus is not talking about situations where judgment is required. We must make judgments every day. Do I take this job or that? Do I eat one more cookie? Do I get gas now or in the morning on my way to work? Well, we all know the answer to that last one, get gas now, but we often substitute justification for judgment, forcing some facts and brushing aside others to correspond with our desire, in this case our laziness. Too often when we say, 'in my considered judgment', what is really meant is, 'here is how I'm justifying my decision' using this the curated set of evidence which I myself will define and consider and if you disagree, you must confine yourself to them, otherwise I'll say you're confusing the issue or missing the point.

But just as my use of the term 'justification' in one context should not be with the use of the term 'justification' in scripture, and just as we should not take the usage of that term by theologians or institutions and overlay that into our reading of scripture, we should also be careful when discussing Jesus's declarations outside of the context in which He makes it.

In this context, Jesus is addressing two issues, one is our tendency to conflate the inner worth of others with their outward actions. It is true that we act in accordance with our

natures, but it does not follow that I or you are in a position to judge them as persons. That doesn't mean we excuse their acts or fail to call them sins. After all, we are to forgive others and if we fail to recognize sins, we're not really forgiving them, we're encouraging their downfall. But from someone's acts, we still only receive a partial picture of who they are, and it is hard to help others not to sin unless we actually know the person committing it. And this is the second issue, most of us have yet to overcome our own sinfulness. And like with others, it is hard to help ourselves overcome sin until we come to know ourselves.

In the end, the tendency to judge others is an outward manifestation of our tendency to judge ourselves. We don't want our sins called out, and we really don't want them forgiven; we want, and this might sound a little weird but bear with me, to be made holy. We want our anger to be affirmed as righteous, our covetousness to be affirmed as a longing for justice, our fear to be affirmed as meekness, our anxiety to be affirmed as wisdom, and our lust to be called love.

We justify our sin and no matter how cogent the argument we use to justify it, no matter how affirming the words of others are, we still bear the image of God and still, deep down, have that old sense of wrongness, and creation continues to moan. And so we lash out at others, quick to condemn others, most violently in those sins ourselves are most enslaved to.

And so, our attempts to right the wrongs of this world are doomed to failure and misery because of our limited understanding of what constitutes 'success', and we are all too willing to sacrifice our own righteousness to achieve an illusory victory. In the end, the human struggle against unrighteousness only leads to more unrighteousness as long as we use the tools of this world to fight them and seek to replace them with worldly things, even if they are good.

That is not God's way. The victory over unrighteousness, even, sin, and death has already been won in Christ Jesus. And His way does not involve our defeat of evil outside ourselves, and not even defeat of the evil within, for He has already done that. Instead, we are called to overcome it, not killing it, but ourselves dying 'indeed unto sin'. We must die and be reborn to partake in the victory already wrought on the Cross. For our struggle is not the way of the warrior, that of the archangel Michael, who defeated Satan by the sword, but that of the suffering servant, Jesus, who crushed Satan by dying on the Cross.

God has no need to judge, He knows. He knows our guilt and He bears with us and creation the suffering caused by it. If we want to overcome the wrongness of the world, we must overcome the wrongness in ourselves and that starts with facing that wrongness and giving it and ourselves over to Christ. And we shall still see the evils of this world and those of men but must come to fight them by granting the same forgiveness and mercy that we have been granted.

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