

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
June 16, 2024 – The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 4:26-34; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17
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Many years ago, there was a cartoon in *The New Yorker Magazine*. A well-dressed, confident and successful looking businessman was being ushered into a hell full of flames and devils with pitch forks. The caption read, "Why wasn't I informed of this?" This morning's reading from St. Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth reminds us clearly that we have been informed. "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil."

The judgment of Christ is not a popular topic these days in the Episcopal Church. We tend to emphasize the salvation that has been offered to us through Christ. Certainly in the words and prayers of the Burial Service in The Book of Common Prayer we find little hint of God's judgment. While there are, of course, good pastoral reasons to emphasize hope when people are grieving, we should not neglect to consider what it will mean for each of us personally to appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Anglican theology takes the issue of judgment seriously, and this is theology firmly rooted in Scripture.

First of all, we need to get away from the idea that we will go before Christ with a list in each hand – one of good deeds and one of bad deeds – hoping that the good deed list will be the longer of the two. That is to think like a child. As St. Paul wrote in the famous passage from First Corinthians, chapter 13: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways" (verse 11).

A more mature approach is to believe that we will appear before Christ as our full selves, in the totality of our being, fully known by God. The good and evil that we have done – our moral history, if you will – is part of our full selves. As I've said so often, Christianity insists that what we do during our bodily, earthly lives matters. All of us have done what is evil, at the very least in the sense of being self-centered and of not loving God with our whole heart, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Most of us who have lived very long will have some specific moral and spiritual failures that we deeply regret.

To appear before the judgment seat of Christ in the totality of our being includes not only the history of our deeds but also the history of what we have done when we realize we have fallen short of living like creatures made in God's image. Have we repented or have we continued on as before? The promise of God's forgiveness is offered to those who repent. In words from the Ash Wednesday service in The Book of Common Prayer: "Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desires not the death of sinners, but rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live ... pardons and absolves all those who truly repent, and with sincere hearts believe his holy Gospel" (page 269). True repentance means more than feeling sorry. It includes making whatever restitution or amends we can to anyone we have harmed, and it means turning back to God and God's Gospel way of life.

Repentance is a serious undertaking. It begins with knowing what we have done and said and thought and even prayed that is out of alignment with our best understanding of God's will for human beings, especially as revealed in the teaching and life of Christ. St. Ignatius urged people to look back on each day to identify where we have strayed, in specific ways, and then to ask God's forgiveness. Doing this practice helps us to change what needs to be changed as we go on to live the next day.

God forgives those who repent and “with sincere hearts believe his holy Gospel.” We have heard the Gospel, haven’t we? We have read the parables of Jesus. We have heard the Sermon on the Mount. We can’t say to God, “Why wasn’t I informed of this?” We have been informed. After washing the disciples’ feet the night before he died Jesus said, “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.... If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (John 13:15, 17). We don’t want to appear before Christ and say, “Oh, you really meant that? You meant me to do that?”

We can fool each other, can’t we? We can keep secrets. We can lie and not be found out. We can give little but justify to ourselves that it is enough. We can put on a good face at church and do church work, while our hearts remain unloving. We can “get away with” a great deal as far as other people are concerned. But not with God. When we appear before the judgment seat of Christ, we will be “fully known.” We are fully known by God now. The author of Psalm 139 wrote: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely” (Psalm 139:1-4).

If our thoughts and deeds are selfish and unloving, these words of scripture are not comforting. How differently we hear them if we are filled with love for Christ! St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “And [Christ] died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Corinthians 5:15). Eucharistic Prayer D expands St. Paul’s words: “And, that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and rose for us, he sent the Holy Spirit, his own first gift for those who believe, to complete his work in the world, and to bring to fulfillment the sanctification of all” (The Book of Common Prayer, page 374).

And now we move to Jesus’ famous parable of the mustard seed. “With what can we compare the kingdom of God...? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (Mark 4:30-32). This parable describes the work of the Holy Spirit. If we offer God a tiny seed of love, with good faith and good will, God will grow that seed, mysteriously and with great power. I hope you have experienced this for yourself. When we open our hearts to the love of God, love grows bigger and bigger. When we open our hands to help our neighbors, our hands can offer more than we might imagine possible on our own. When we learn the compassion of God, we look at more and more of God’s children with compassion and with a will to help. The Holy Spirit gives great growth to our tiny seeds of faith and love.

St. Paul wrote: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). In Christ and by the gift of the Holy Spirit, we can turn from the kingdom of the world, from what is old, to the new creation, the kingdom of love and life that God desires for all God’s children. We have heard the call of the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus. How blessed we will be – and all God’s creatures with us – if we will do what Jesus has taught us to do! In his holy name. Amen.