

Sermon Lent 5 2019

April 7, 2019

Phil :3:4b-14

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning our meditation will focus on the Epistle Lesson, previously read.

As I was reading the Gospel Lesson this week I was struck by those words: **“But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.’ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.”** In particular what struck me was that last part: and they killed him. They killed the son. Of course, we know what the parable is about, who that parable is about. We know who that Son is: it’s Jesus. And I reflected on that: “and they killed Him.” God in the flesh: dead.

As I thought about that I couldn’t help but make the connection to Nietzsche, the philosopher so well known for the quote, “God is dead.” He said through the mouth of a crazy man in a brief writing, *“God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?”* What sad words, right? And what did he mean? Well, you see, what he was referring to was how the philosophies that man had intellectualized in the Seventeen and Eighteen Hundreds in particular, had allowed a person to have the ability to argue by reason that God doesn’t exist. And while there’s an air about this that obviously saddened the author, we have to understand, he wanted to push this to its end. He wanted us to “defeat” God’s shadow, leaving no remnant in culture of a people who had worshipped this God. He thought that morality was merely a manifestation of what is best for a culture. He wanted this destroyed. “This is the heir. Let us kill Him.”

As we reflect on this writing composed in 1882, we see how this mindset has taken hold so thoroughly in our day and place. While most people would take offense at the thought of claiming there is no God, the common grounding of morality has vanished, so that now we see all of it as relative. The idea that we would speak publicly about God is seen as a violation of the separation between Church and State—

something that's incorrect by the way. You as a Christian have every right in our country to speak of your faith openly. We even have the right to speak as witnesses to things in view of our faith. But the mindset that's prevailing is that this isn't the case. God belongs in your Church, maybe in your home and that's the extent of it. Why?

Well, in short because, while I have spoken of it in relation to killing God, the reality is that the desire to kill God is at its heart no different than what Paul is talking about in the Epistle Lesson. Listen to what he says there again, **"If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."** Now, Paul is talking there about his life as a Jew before he was converted. He was talking about his life where he found himself following the Law to a T. And how did he describe himself with regard to that law? Blameless. In other words, as Paul looked at all of this. As he examined himself in that time before his conversion, he said, "you know what? I'm a good person. I'm a good enough person because I do x, y, and z in the Law, and because of that, God is pleased with me." In other words, what was Paul actually doing and saying? He was saying that he wasn't that bad. We should say as he infers later in the lesson, that he found in himself a righteousness that was his own.

When Nietzsche, and our culture today following him, say that we don't need God in the midst of this understanding of morality. When we hear ourselves calling morality merely a byproduct of the masses, what are we really seeking to do? We are trying to justify ourselves, to find ourselves righteous of our own. Sure, it may not sound like a concern, and there's a sense in which an atheistic nihilist like Nietzsche is saying that the point isn't justification, it's individual freedom. If there's an assumption that God isn't there and wasn't in the first place, the person isn't going to be seeking to be found righteous before God.

Of course, as I said, this isn't the view of a large majority of people—it's influenced by this, but it's not their view. No their view is much softer. "Yes there is a God, but He's so soft and kind and loving, anyone besides Hitler can justify themselves before Him. I can justify myself, like Paul. I'm a pretty good person. I mean don't get me wrong, I'm not like Mother Theresa, but my good outweighs my bad."

And as I say, that, we have to need to examine ourselves for this very mindset. It creeps in in manifold ways. It creeps in, as I've been saying recently, in how we always, always, always underestimate the effects of the fall into sin. It creeps in in how we'd

like to create a morality, a checklist by which we can stand before God justified, especially over and against that person over there. In our own way we want to kill God and have confidence in our flesh.

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” Think about what Paul is saying now after His conversion. And understand where Paul is. He’s in jail. He’s locked up in Rome. What a lot this life as a Christian has been for him. He’s been beaten, he’s been stoned. He’s been arrested on false pretense, and now he lives imprisoned. But what does he have to say? This is gain to him. Sure in his former life, he had room for confidence. He had standing, he had zeal, he had blamelessness under the law. Furthermore, he was by what we see in the book of Acts looking to be one of great potential. He had sat at the feet of the star rabbi of the day, a man by the name of Gamaliel. It’s pretty clear he had some really strong connections in the governing body of the Sanhedrin. He had it all set. But what was all that? It was loss. This life he has in prison, this life in Jesus, that’s gain. That life before? That’s loss. It’s damage, it’s a penalty.

In fact, he says that word there for loss three times, then he intensifies it. And what does he say? It’s rubbish. It’s trash. And as I say that, that’s actually not intense enough. The King James gets closer when it calls it dung. That life of luxury and comfort is poop compared to Jesus. That self-righteousness is manure compared to Jesus. To try and set myself up as God and kill Him, that’s dung compared to Jesus.

Why? **“that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”** That by any means he might attain the resurrection of the dead. What a beautiful gift Christians, the resurrection from the dead. And this is the gift that Paul tells us he’s striving for. He wants to keep clamoring and clamoring for it. He’s going to forget about the past he had and stretch forth toward that goal. **“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting**

what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

I love the way he speaks there. He knows that he still has to struggle, he knows he hasn't been raised yet, he's not already perfect, or better, he hasn't been perfected yet, but he keeps pushing against this world, against the flesh, against confidence in himself. Why? Because Jesus Christ had made Paul His own. And that word there for made his own, I think that's not stark enough. The word is a word for seizing or grasping. Think about that, Jesus grasping Paul. Jesus seizing him. Like putting Paul into his custody, He's not letting Paul go.

Christian, He has seized you. The God we as sinners would seek to kill, He has been killed for us. He has taken our sin, your sin to cross. And in His resurrection, His shows victory over that death. Over your death. And in His ascension then there is that upward call to you. It's in that that He has seized you. It's into that that He has baptized you, put you into His Name, into His custody, made you His own. And He has given you that righteousness that comes not from the Law, but by faith in Him. He has given you life, given you justification that you would need it in no other place or way.

To close I'd like to reflect on what this means for just a second. As I was sitting in Starbucks reading for this sermon, I was thinking about how influenced we are by these thoughts of Nietzsche, by this idea that we have killed God—or that we have no grounded morality. And in view of that, I was thinking about identity in the midst of our day. Now, I don't know if you're familiar with the term identity politics, but that's a big thing in so many ways. That's the term used to describe what we see with all of the focus on race, or gender, or sexual identity. For example, as a part of this, it becomes very important for people to be identified by those things: a white, heterosexual male, or a black, homosexual woman; or an Hispanic transgender man.

Here's the thought: are we all willing to count all of our identities as loss, as dung, for the gain of knowing Jesus, for the gain of being seized by Him? That's that joy of your baptism Christians. He is your identity. He is the One who gives your identity purpose and justification before the world. Your identity in sharing in His suffering, in the cleansing and purity of your conscience in His righteousness is all you need. You don't even need to identify yourselves as ones who live in Western Springs—or wherever you might live—or by your car, your house, your social group. It's in Christ. Christ who was killed and who rose again. Christ who was the Son of the vineyard owner. Christ the stone rejected, who has become the cornerstone. Christ who makes you whole in Him. Amen.