

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Third Sunday after Pentecost/June 25, 2017

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

I read something this week that said Jesus was against orthodoxies. I think that view reflected more of the writer's agenda than that of Jesus. Jesus was against a temple system where one group dominated another. Jesus was against hierarchies that demanded compliance of the other more than respect *for* the other. Later in Matthew's Gospel when a mother sought preferential treatment for her sons, he taught his disciples: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you." Not even in families should one seek preferment over others. Jesus turns the hierarchy on its head. High position is not about being served by others and having their compliance, but greatness is about serving others and gaining their respect. When Jesus speaks of setting a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, he is splitting up a hierarchical, even patriarchal family system. Jesus' sword is to cut through hierarchy. When the compliance-demanding hierarchy is split open then there is the possibility of reconciliation and enduring peace.

In Quincy, Massachusetts a counselor wrote of what it took to be a good father to a grade school child. He quoted a thought from another counselor that has become ubiquitous now. It went, "Don't walk in front of me...I may not follow. Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Walk beside me...just be my friend." The counselor added, "Maybe that's what 'being a father' is all about...just being a friend." Now, one can argue that a parent cannot always be a friend depending on what you mean by those words. But I think a parent can always seek respect over demanding compliance.

Our baptism sets us on this track. We are to respect the dignity of every human being. Baptism sets us on the way of the cross. We are to give of

ourselves in love for the life of another, just as Jesus gave of himself in love for the life of the world. Every good parent tries to do that. It is not a way of demanding compliance but of earning respect. It is a new way of life that grabs a hold of us when we follow Jesus.

Now when we face up to a system that belittles others rather than upholds them we are not likely to be greeted enthusiastically. When one stands up to a religious hierarchy that demands deference when religion itself requires humility, one ought not to expect a warm welcome. When one confronts an autocratic government or business executive who expects compliance when we demand respect, one's station in life is not likely to be assured. There is much to fear in trying to split up a compliance-demanding hierarchical system. There is a cost to following the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love, the way of granting others dignity.

So Jesus has this great discourse on fear. Don't be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. We have seen this play out literally in those who oppose the autocratic Russian president. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of losing a job, or preferment, or of parental rage. If you want to be afraid, Jesus says, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. That is, be afraid of God. But because God is God there is no need to fear. Jesus quickly explains, there is not one sparrow worth half a penny that falls to the ground apart from God the Father. So don't be afraid – you are worth more than many sparrows. You can face whatever comes knowing that God is with you. Not even death need be feared. God's love is stronger. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" There is nothing we cannot face when in the presence of God's love. I was singing the hymn Amazing Grace at funerals the past two days. There is a similar paradox in the second verse, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved..." Don't be afraid, even when we are scared. Trust God's grace.

Leave it to Christians to meet fear with song. There is something about singing that helps us be less afraid. During the Easter season we sing the invitatory anthem "Christ our Passover," part of which comes from the Romans passage we heard this morning. We sing: "Christ being raised from

the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death that he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So also consider yourselves dead to sin, and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Alleluia.”

The anthem reminds us that the power of the resurrection is already at work in us. It “entices” us to stand against domination. Nothing, not death, not the power of sin, can have dominion over one who knows the power of resurrection. Once we let this power loose in our lives we can’t hold back. We stand up to powers that belittle and dehumanize others. Like Jeremiah it is as though “within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” Resurrection can’t stand still against domination. We can’t deny the reality of resurrection. We can’t repress it. We can’t resist it. It is a kind of fire that must burst forth.

So don’t be afraid. Cut through compliance-demanding domination. Jesus brings a sword with which to do it. It is nothing less than the power of resurrection which gives life and dignity to all. We are not too small or too weak. In fact, Paul reminds us that God’s grace is sufficient and God’s power is made perfect in weakness. Jeremiah has something similar in mind though stated in more martial terms. The “Lord is with me like a dreaded warrior.” We are not alone. We have the power of resurrection by our side.

Jesus starts with family and denounces domination of one over others. Then he goes to the temple system that sets rich against poor, and overturns the tables. Finally he reaches up to the Roman Empire itself that coerces peoples in order to dominate the world. He splits open domination with the sword of love. The end is resurrection and new life. This is the contrary way in which we are to live, the way along which God entices us. Often there is hesitancy in our steps. But let there be a song in our hearts. “Alleluia. Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us; therefore let us keep the feast, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Alleluia.”

*Amen.*