

THEOLOGICAL DISSONANCE

A Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

This morning I cannot give you a sermon of sweetness and light even though the Epistle lesson gives us a message of seemingly unlimited and infinite Love. There seems to be a conflict between St. John's Epistle and the OT lesson and the Gospel, which seem to give us a message that is almost completely opposite to that of St. John's Epistle. Sweetness and light are hard to find because of so many things that are happening in this country and in the world. It seems that the majority of the world is barreling down that road paved with good intentions at an ever-increasing rate of speed. A question is what is real here. There seems to be a whole lot that seems to be something. Let's see if we can't tear away this veil and find out what is real as opposed to what just seems to be real. Because we are human, we need some tools to do this. Fortunately, those tools were provided for us by some theologians of the 17th and later centuries.

It often seems to be providential that something we have read or seen or heard a few weeks ago applies to our current situation. That seems to be the case with me and my reading. Recently, I have been reading Dr. R. C. Sproul's book, *The Holiness of God*. That led me to go back into Arthur Pink's little book, *The Attributes of God*. The study of the attributes of God seems to have fallen into disfavor in recent years, (more seeming here) as academic theologians want to be in fashion and follow the latest theological fads. Thank goodness that is not so with Dr. Wayne Grudem, who has 76 pages on the attributes of God in his monumental book, *Systematic Theology*.

You may be wondering where am I going with this, and why am I going there. The reason is this: the OT lesson has Isaiah issuing a prophecy of God's having said that a lot of bad things are going to happen to certain people, with that OT lesson followed by an Epistle that tells us that God is Love, and that being followed by an example of someone, the unnamed rich man being punished in hell because of his way of life and his spirit that led him to ignore the beggar at his gate. What we seem to have here is what I call "Theological dissonance", which is the result of two opposing things that we think we know something about, coming together to be part of what is supposed to be a harmonious whole. God tells us about theological dissonance when he says

in Isaiah 5:20 **20 Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!**

This kind of thing of trying to harmonize opposites or seeming opposites is the sort of thing philosophers love. I think somebody once said, “Too much philosophy is bad for the mind.” Dr. Sproul tells us that Friedrich Nietzsche, who declared that “God is dead” spent his last years in an insane asylum and signed his writings from there, “The Crucified”. Another German philosopher who came after Nietzsche and made things even worse, was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. It was Hegel who introduced the idea of the *dialectic*, that knowledge can be gotten by finding a synthesis between an idea, called a *thesis*, and its opposite, which is called its *antithesis*. That is what some people try to do in theology, and it doesn’t work. That is what God is telling us in Isaiah 5:20, just not in so many words. What God is implying there is this: Suppose there is some sort of behavior that God says is wrong: stealing, lying, gossiping, anything, but you think it is OK. If you think you can find some philosophical argument or any other kind of argument such as a social justice one that will let you decide that that something that God says is wrong, is really right and OK, then you are in for a heap of trouble. Woe is you. Calling evil, good will get you in big trouble with God.

Let’s see how this is working out in the world today. On Friday night about 10:30, the State Senate of New York voted 33-29 to pass a law making same-sex “marriages” legal. The law had been passed in the House some time earlier. Governor Andrew Cuomo then signed it into law before midnight Friday. This makes the state of New York the sixth state to have such a law. Apparently, they have decided that they can overturn one of God’s laws by means of a so-called “democratic process”. I guess that none of the 33 senators who voted to pass the bill have ever read Isaiah 5:20, and neither has Governor Cuomo, of whom I read yesterday that he has two daughters and is living with his girl friend, Sandra Lee, to whom he is not married. It turns out that they are both divorced Roman Catholics and so can’t be married in the RC church, so, why not just shack up? “Woe unto them, ...” I do not judge them. We all have to leave judgment to God.

Now, I got sidetracked on that New York rabbit trail because it is a pertinent illustration of the basic idea behind my thoughts for today; the idea of seeming theological dissonance between two of the attributes of God: the attribute of the Holiness of God and that God is Love. The NY legislature and Governor Cuomo think that allowing same-sex “marriage” is a matter of social

justice, and so does most of the Episcopal Church which is busily writing marriage ceremonies for the “Solemnization” of such “marriages”. Bishop Mark Sisk of the Episcopal Diocese of New York wrote an open letter to the entire diocese and the world, welcoming the passage of the law. Isaiah 5:20 **Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil;**

Why is there this seeming dissonance between God’s laws and commandments on the one hand and the idea that God is Love on the other hand? The simplest explanation is that our idea of God’s love is like that of the child who deliberately does something bad and got caught and then says, “If you really loved me you, you wouldn’t spank me.” We humans are like that.

Dr. Sproul writes of an experiment he tried in a class on the Old Testament he was teaching at a seminary. He had 250 students in the class, mostly freshmen. He gave them absolute deadlines for when they had to turn in the 3 papers they had to write, each on the last day of September, October and November, with the additional condition that any late paper would get a grade of F; the only exceptions were being sick enough to be in the infirmary, or having the death of a relative. When the first paper came due, 25 students quaked in terror, and begged for mercy with excuses along the line of they didn’t know college would be so hard and they hadn’t yet learned to budget their time, and so on. So he showed them mercy, and granted all 25 an extension, but told them that next time, no paper on time meant an F. Then, when the end of the next month rolled around, 50 students did not have their papers to turn in. Again, the excuses flew: it’s Midterms; we’re totally snowed under; it was Homecoming, and so on. Again, he granted all of them mercy, but said that the next time he would be true to his word. The next time at the end of November, 150 students had their papers ready and 100 nonchalantly did not have theirs ready. About 10% were not ready with the first paper; but after they were showed mercy, that doubled to 20% of the class missing the next deadline. After they were all showed mercy, the amount of delinquency doubled again to 40% of the class. He concluded that it does not take very many grants of mercy before most people take it for granted that mercy will be given in almost any circumstance.

Today’s Propers were put together to show that while God is Love, **that** does not mean that He will forgive anything and everything; and **that** to say that God is Love does not mean that no one will ever be condemned to hell as the Universalists believe. All this hinges on God’s attribute of Holiness. In one of the chapters of his book, Dr. Sproul takes a deep look at something that almost drove Martin Luther insane, the idea of the *Justice* of God. According to some,

and I think Dr. Sproul is one of those, the idea of the Justice of God is part of the idea of the Holiness of God. Here is a fact: The phrase, “Holiness of God”, does not occur in the Greek manuscripts of the Bible. What does occur in several places is the phrase, **δικαιοσύνη Θεού**, which is usually translated as the *Righteousness of God*. That is exactly the same phrase that concerned Luther because, when he was a monk, he was working from a Latin bible in which the phrase in Romans 3:21 is given as, *iustitia Dei*, from which the English translation of Luther’s Latin into English would obviously be the *justice of God*. What this tells us is that Sproul’s idea of the Holiness of God came from **δικαιοσύνη Θεού**, but may extend into further ideas of holiness such as God’s being set apart from all other things, because He created them.

So one of the attributes of God, whether it is considered separately, or as part of the Holiness of God, is that God is Just, that He dispenses Justice with an even hand, according to his rules. As St. Paul in Romans 9:15 quotes from Exodus 33:19: **Romans 9:15 15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."** However, there is a question begging for an answer: is God’s Love so great and so all-encompassing that it is infinite and that there is no one whom God did not love? In the two verses immediately preceding this quote in Romans from Exodus, St. Paul gives us the answer that resolves the seeming dissonance in today’s lessons. **In Romans 9:13-14 13 As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." 14 What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!** The righteousness of God is such that no matter what He does, it will be just, even if to we humans it seems to be an injustice. God loves those who love Him and keep His commandments, as he says in the latter part of the Second Commandment: **Exodus 20:5-6 5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; 6 And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.**

The justice God dispenses depends on the attitude of those whom He judges, but we also see another of God’s attributes in the last clause of the Second Commandment – Mercy. God is a God of Mercy, so much so, that just as Dr. Sproul demonstrated, we have come to expect it.

I deliberately did not tell you the end of that story, ..., yet. After the 100 students showed up without their last papers, he took out his grade book and began calling off their names and declaring that this time, for this paper, they got an F. The objections were loud and immediate.

He continued calling names and declaring a grade of F until he came to a student who had also not turned in his second paper on time, and who complained loudly about receiving an F this time. Sproul asked him, “Do you think this is unfair?” When the Student said “Yes.”, Sproul replied with this: “I see. It’s justice you want? ... If you insist on justice, you will certainly get it. I’ll not only give you and F for this assignment, but I’ll change your last grade to the F you so richly deserved.” The student backed off and apologized and was happy to get only one F instead of two. Dr. Sproul does not say whether he gave them mercy again after his show of what true justice would be like. I suspect he did not.

There is no dissonance between Love and Justice when Love must be reciprocal and Justice in the Bible refers to conformity to a rule or a norm. Disobey God’s rules and justice will be swift if there is no reason for mercy, as it was with Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-, or Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6:6-8, or Korah, or Dathan and Abiram in Numbers 16:1-33.

God has seen fit to show mankind much mercy since the Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of His Son, so much so that we expect it. Dr. Sproul Quotes the German theologian Hans Küng as saying in regard to these seemingly harsh judgments in the OT, “the most mysterious aspect of the mystery of sin is not that the sinner deserves to die, but rather that the sinner in the average situation continues to exist.” Sproul wonders why God permits the ongoing rebellion. I suspect it is because Jesus prophesied it in Revelation. As Hymn 538 says, “God is working His purpose out...” But there is another reason why mercy is so freely given now after the Ascension and Pentecost: to give people time to repent, to give the Holy Spirit time to soften hard hearts.

Repentance is a very large part of Jesus’ message. John the Baptist came preaching repentance, and the first word Jesus is recorded to have said when he began his ministry of preaching is given in Matthew 4:17 **17 From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**

Does repentance have anything to do with our Gospel lesson? Well, yes, at least in its absence. The unnamed rich man is in the flames of hell. Why? What was his sin? It was not that he was rich. Rich men can get into heaven as easily as God can make a camel go through the eye of a needle, which for God would be a trivial thing. No, it is that he was proud and even more than proud, he was arrogant to think that he could ask that Lazarus be sent to serve him in hell when he never paid any attention to Lazarus’ plight. He knew Lazarus’ name, so he knew Lazarus existed. Even in hell, he still has his arrogance toward Lazarus, so while it may seem

that he has repented of his former sins, there is still one that even in hell, he is not aware of enough to be sorry for it and repent of it, or wish he could have repented of it. And so the rich man has received justice, God's just justice. Perhaps, most likely, had he repented before he died, Jesus would not have had this story to tell.

One key that unlocks the treasure of God's love is repentance, for it is the first act of each step of our sanctification. As Jesus said, **Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.** Repent and be not afraid of God's righteous judgments.

AMEN!