



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday October 4, 2015 - Trinity 18

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.**

The passage selected for the sermon today is taken from the Gospel:

“When the Pharisees had heard that Jesus had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting Him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law?”

This was a difficult sermon to write. Part of the difficulty was that my work week was spent unraveling the history of my new employer, and finding fresh complications of propriety and misunderstanding with every layer of history I unwrapped, which consumed not just my time, but my focus. Every document and every conversation caused me to change my view of that world. The other part of the difficulty is my memory of this passage. It gets used in each of the three Synoptic Gospels, but with a different context in each. In St Mark's Gospel, the scribe that asks the question in earnest, and Jesus tells that lawyer that his understanding is good, and that the lawyer is not far from heaven. In St Luke's Gospel, the point of the question is to launch the parable of the Good Samaritan so Jesus can teach the Israelites that the neighbor, in “love thy neighbor as thyself” is not just other Jews, but the Gentiles and indeed the world.

In this case, the lawyer that confronts Jesus is using the tried and true legal formula of posing a dilemma. The questioner believes that no matter which answer Jesus chose, that it would offend at least one powerful group that could then use the answer to condemn Him. The Sadducees used a similar trick when they asked Jesus about paying Taxes. It is not an honest question, but a trap, a false dilemma that is meant to

discredit and compromise Jesus as a Teacher and the Messiah.

Jesus follows this conversation with the discussion of Psalm 110, and whether David's Lord can possibly be his Son if he addresses him as Lord. The point of the discussion of Psalm 110 is to present these questioners, who propose a trap for Jesus, with a simple paradox of Scripture that they can't answer, undermining their authority to use Scripture as a trap, or more specifically as their tool to promote their personal agenda. He strips away the façade of their authority to disarm their attempt to twist the words of God to their political and personal ambitions.

Perhaps what is timely and timeless about this passage is the simple understanding that we do not understand the mind of God. That what God sees and does is not ours to appropriate for personal judgment or for personal ambition. The Old Testament is thousands of years of prophecy to prepare the Chosen People, on behalf of the world, to receive and know its Savior, Jesus Christ. The very people entrusted with the sum of this knowledge, this revelation, got it wrong. Since then, history is thousands of years the new Chosen people appropriating the witness of Christ for the most ungodly purposes that man or Satan could possibly imagine.

Because we have a loving God, really because God is love, he doesn't expect us to, or allow us to interpret His Holy purpose. He makes it simple for us by asking us to keep His great commandments, which are the simplest expression of His will for us, and our relationship to Him. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and the way that you do that is by loving each other the way that I have loved you.

Following that simple commandment is all we have to do, and yet, like the lawyer in today's passage we would rather justify ourselves. Justification in the eyes of God is forgiveness for the sake of Love, and forgiving others rather than judging them is the hardest thing we have to learn to do. Our human inclination, the most natural thing about our lives, is that we judge all the time. We do it badly, we always get it wrong, and yet we are bound to judge as surely as we are bound to breathe.

The notorious sinners of the world that fill our tabloids and television sets and social media with their sordid lives are met with indignation. Those people whose choices of sin are not our choices are easily condemned. When the rare moments of introspection and honesty reveal to our hearts that we are unworthy sinners too, we abandon the pedestal of our own judgment throne, and pull ourselves up on the throne of heaven, condemning our world, our enemies, even our own friends and families as the voice of God and His Church. I can judge you on behalf of Jesus Christ, even though I am surely to be judged as unworthy myself when I stand before the same Lord and God.

In the parable about the wheat and the tares, Jesus responds to His servants that want to rip up all the weeds that were sown by an enemy in the garden of the Lord by telling them to hold back, be patient, and wait for the harvest, because in pulling up the weeds as they are growing, the servants are likely to damage and destroy the good grain as well as the bad.

That damage to the harvest that comes from tearing up the weeds has real consequence in our world. Father Guy has talked about the difficulty faced when the hospice we supported was first confronted with the epidemic of Aids. The Board at the time, a Board representing both the Community and the Church, was torn about whether they could allow gay men dying of Aids to be treated in their facility. No matter what level of sin we judge homosexuality to be, it certainly does not compare to denying the comfort of God to a soul facing death. If there was a case where tearing out the weeds through the ugliness of judgment would harm the good fruit, this was it. The truth is always that presumption of judgment puts us in greater risk of condemnation than those we dare to judge.

We have a complex world, full of paradox, including how it is that God can allow evil to be in this world alongside what is good. That juxtaposition doesn't just exist to the external world, but it is true within creation as well. The Church itself is both the cradle of grace and the font of hypocrisy. It is the keeper of the sacraments and has committed atrocities. It is the means of forgiveness, and the justification of much sad and hurtful judgment. Our families are a paradox. We become one flesh with our spouses to learn the mystery of being one with God, and then use that intimacy to injure each other. We are united with siblings in blood to know the meaning of being united in the Blood of Christ, and then hold grudges that separate us from each other all our lives. We bring forth children to love, and sometimes those children are the source of pain that is unbearable. Certainly, our lives are full of paradox. We seek the love of God and His forgiveness, and live with pain and hardness of heart that choke that forgiveness from flowing through us to those who need it from us.

No amount of quoting Scripture will open the mind of God to our human minds. No amount of projection of our own sinfulness onto others will give us the right to judge them. No amount of fear, or pain or suffering will relieve us of the duty to forgive those who hurt us most. We are not avenging angels, we are simply children whose only duty is to learn Love.

We don't know why God has placed in this world of paradox. We do know that when we try to love one another instead of judge one another that we please God, who gave His only Son to die for our redemption, even though we will never be worthy of that sacrifice. We need to learn that condemnation of others puts our own souls in jeopardy, but that forgiveness, and patience and love bring us peace, a peace that passes all understanding.

In the Name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.