

Sermon Advent 3c 2021

Walking the Walk and not Merely Talking the Talk

By The Rev. W. Frank Allen

Introduction: Loss of the Sense of Divine Judgment

I recently received what I first took as a compliment from a member of our congregation;

Who noted that I consistently preached and taught on the love and grace of God;

On the promise that Jesus loves us, that Jesus died for us and rose again;

And that Jesus is personally and intimately involved in our day to day lives;

When we receive His love and live our lives in faith.

I say I took it as a compliment, because the love of God is a powerful force;

The love of God is a powerful force for good in our lives and in the life of the world;

And like most of us, when we receive a compliment or positive feedback;

It felt good to think that I was doing something right.

But as the day and the days wore on;

I began to wonder whether I'm only telling part of the story;

Whether I was only sharing part of the truth about the Christian life;

And decided that I better take the next opportunity I'm given;

To preach or to teach something about the reality of God's judgment.

Something about the judgement that goes hand in hand with the love and grace of God;

After all, as we talked about last Sunday, what's the purpose of grace and forgiveness;

If there's not something to be forgiven for;

If there's not something to be pardoned from?

And the Christian life, the life of faith, is not anything goes;

But a call to holiness, to goodness, to grace, to living as Jesus lived;

As much as we can.

So, given a second Sunday with our friend and brother, John the Baptist;

Today's the day!

It seems to me that one of the great challenges and even failures of the Church today;
And of our nation as a whole, is the loss of that sense of divine judgment;
A loss of the sense of the reality that everything we do on each day of our lives;
Is done before the throne of God or done in the presence of God.

And that one day, possibly one day soon;
We will be judged not by what we think or feel, but by how we've lived our lives.

It's as if there is a personal and a collective unconsciousness;
In the Church and in our nation about divine judgement;
A personal forgetfulness at work that says we can do whatever we want
As long as we don't get caught;
And if we do get caught, that we can do whatever it takes to get off
And not face the consequences for our actions.

We run stop signs when no one is looking or speed down residential streets;
We cheat on papers and tests at school and on tasks at work;
We look the other way when someone is getting a raw deal;
We look after ourselves first and get as much as we can for ourselves;
And as long we don't get caught, we think it's all right with God.

I spoke with a priest friend of mine years ago
Who was serving a church near Houston, Texas;
Who had a couple of high ranking Enron executives in his parish.

For those of you who don't know or who have forgotten;
Enron was a company who systematically and creatively defrauded
Customers and stock owners of billions of dollars and went bankrupt.
My friend told me that after the company had been destroyed

And hundreds of people had lost their jobs and their retirements and savings;
One of the executives, who was a parishioner, dropped by to talk with him
He said this executive seemed very relaxed, very at home in the Rector's office;
They spoke at length about what had happened
And the executive told him that they had just been unlucky in getting caught.

They were just doing what everyone else was doing;
As he got up to leave he told Doug, not to worry, he'd still pay his pledge.

Dishonesty and cheating on a corporate scale and on a personal scale;
Have become such a part of our everyday lives and is just one of the signs;
That we've forgotten this life is not all there is;
We're overlooking the fact that what we say we believe;
Things like God's grace, doing good works, and caring for the poor;
Need to play out in the way we live our lives.

Because one day this will come to an end;
And God will be judging us by the way we've lived our lives.

John the Baptist

And into this collective forgetfulness about living our lives in the presence of God;
This personal and communal unconsciousness that assumes
We can do whatever we want as long as we don't get caught;
Comes John the Baptist with the reality and with the promise;
That one day the Lord is coming and coming with judgment.

John the Baptist stands before us on the way to Bethlehem and Christmas
Confronting us with the reality of our sins and our need to live a different way.

Reminding us of God's call to live in a way that is pleasing to God;
In a way that touches and changes others by the quality of our lives;
In a way that invites others into this life of faith and grace and goodness

We are coming to know in our lives with God.

But John doesn't confront us to be obnoxious or just to make us feel bad about ourselves;
He confronts us because he knows, as we know deep down in our souls;
That people rarely change until they experience judgment.

He confronts us because he knows, as most of us know, that people rarely change;
Until they experience the call to get out to stop denying some shadowy parts of our lives
Until we hear some summons to get completely honest about ourselves;
So that we can act differently;
That's one of the reasons the crowds loved John;
He was telling them the truth and they knew it.

You see, you can't think your way into right action; that will get you nowhere.
The mind is like a magician with too many tricks up her sleeve;
To be overthrown by mere thinking;
It will hoodwink us every time;
Because our minds can rationalize pretty much any pattern of life as acceptable.

And the intent to change will not bring about the change in life God expects and wants;
Resolutions and promises to change don't bring about change either;
If you want proof of that, check out your New Year's resolutions for 2021;
If you can find them.

No, the only way to change our minds and our hearts is to admit how we've fallen short;
As we talked about last Sunday, to ask God's forgiveness and then to act differently;
To live our lives in a different way;
That's why John confronts us and gives us the promise of a different way of life.

And the people listening to John catch the difference;
They seem to understand that it's about acting, it's about living;

They don't ask him what to think or what to confess or what to promise;
They ask 'What shall we do'? And John tells them in very specific terms.
For those with too much, give it away to those in need;
Tax collectors, be fair, take no more than you should;
Soldiers, live honestly, don't misuse your authority;
And to everyone, be content with what you have.

John reminds us that we have a responsibility to live our lives in a way;
That recognizes that everything we do is done in the presence of God;
That there are no secrets about how we're living our lives
When it comes to God.

And that when we change the way we act, the way we're living each day;
Then we make room for the grace of God to come in to change us
To empower us to live more and more as God is calling us to live;
And to see God's judgment as part of God's grace and love.

Imagine how different the world would be if you and I started living our lives;
With one eye on judgment day and the other on the grace and forgiveness of God.

Getting Ready This Christmas

In these final days of the season of Advent; this season of waiting;
This season of preparing to celebrate Christ's first coming nearly 2000 years ago;
All of us are getting ready for Christmas in some fashion or another.

We're using our time and resources to decorate, to buy, wrap, send and give presents;
We're spending our days selecting and sending cards, letters and emails;
We're baking and deciding on the menu for a special meal;
Many of us are giving more time to our prayer lives;
We're taking action in the hope of enjoying a merry Christmas this year;
And making room in our hearts for Christ to come again or for the first time.

In the same way, we are called to take action

By the way we live our lives all through the year;
To take action in the hope of Christ coming again, in the hope of judgement day;
We're called to act in Godly ways so that when Christ comes again;
We will have made a difference by the way we've lived our lives;
And be prepared for the new life that awaits us.

We are called to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God;

As the prophet Micah says;
We are called to rejoice always, as St. Paul encourages us this morning;
We are called to live honestly and fairly and contentedly as John says;
And we are called to love God and love our neighbors as we love ourselves
As Jesus says again and again in the Gospels.

These are the preparations and actions we must take if we are to live in the hope
Of Jesus coming again and to receive grace with judgment.

And so invite you to remember that the love of God,
The most powerful force in the universe, is linked to God's judgment;
God loves us enough to call us to a higher life;
To forgive us, not so we can keep on sinning;
Or being less of the person He is calling us to be;
But so that we may start again to act and live and love
As though our faith matters.

Today is the day to begin and now is the time to act;
For He is coming again.

Amen.