



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 51:1-12; John 12:27-33

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 21, 2021
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 12:27-33

‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say- “Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable and even joyful in your sight. For you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In this morning’s New Testament Lesson, we hear none other than the voice of God! Interestingly, it is one of only three times that we will audibly hear the voice of God in the New Testament. We first hear it at the time of Jesus’ Baptism. The voice from heaven says: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We hear it a second time at Jesus’ transfiguration: “This is my Son, the Chosen; listen to him!” And when we hear God’s word again this morning, and for the third time, it is good for us to remember something of context to begin nearly two-thirds of John’s Gospel has to do with the final days of Jesus’ life, which is to say that, we are only in chapter 12. The end of Jesus’ earthly life is undoubtedly drawing near. And this reality - it troubles Jesus, because he knows exactly what’s going to happen to him in Jerusalem. He knows the high and glorious purpose of the cross and at some level, it grieves him.

One could even go so far as to say that it horrifies him, because that too is at the heart of what Jesus means when he says in verse 27, "Now my soul is troubled." And would it be troubled? We would currently be horrified. Wouldn't we? If the wages of sin are death, the very judgement of God. Tell me. Would we presume that the appeasement of that punishment would happen without a measure of guilt or shame, our fear and our anxiety? No, Jesus felt all of that and yet, in spite of a troubled soul, Jesus remains true to his calling, and in this morning's lectionary reading, Jesus offers a prayer. A petition that God would glorify not "my" name, referring to Jesus' name, but "your" name, referring to God's name. "Father, glorify your name." Jesus says. In other words, what God is doing in and through Jesus' life that particular and glorious and redemptive work. It is more important than anything else in the whole of creation. It must be accomplished, even at the expense of Jesus' own life...and Jesus knows this!

It is in response to Jesus having said, "Father, glorify your name," that we hear that voice from heaven, once again, and it declares: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." Which is to say that what God has been doing up until now, it is glorious, but it isn't finished. It is as if God were saying here, that in the cross of Christ I, the Godhead glory! In other words, God's glory is the death of his son. It is the pain and the suffering. That is the glorious work of God. Now, upon hearing this kind of news today, the world may still perceive it as thunder. A loud and cacophonous clashing, of sounds nearly indistinguishable from a kind of heavenly boom. Some might even think it to be the voice of an angel, a messenger with good tidings. But to those to whom God has given ears to hear, these are the words of God and the Bible goes on to tell us that they are not for Jesus benefit. No! They are for ours! Jesus puts it this way, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine." Upon hearing that, my own mind hearkens back to another occasion in John's Gospel. That time when Jesus was about to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead. The Bible tells us that as they rolled the stone away, Jesus looked upward and this is what he said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."

Oh, to be certain that the parables Jesus told, the miracles that he performed, ultimately his death and resurrection. They were all for the glory of God and for the eternal benefit of the world. John chapter 20:31 could not be more clear about this: "These things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing in him you may have life in his name." Such as the truth that God has given us, that in the very cross of Jesus we behold the glory of God and that glory, that love it was so great that God spared not his own son, for our sake!

Now, as God has determined through the work of his Son to bring us into a right relationship with him, to reconcile us, to save us. Should not our lives reflect something of that extraordinary mercy that we ourselves have received? Should not our lives also be lived for the benefit of others? Assuming that our life is, in fact, intended to be a blessing for others. Then what is it that prevents us from expressing our faith? What is it that keeps us from letting our light shine, as brightly as it can? Is it because we want to avoid sounding like a Pharisee? The one who stands up on a sanctuary soapbox, and with the greatest of piety, declares: "Lord, thank goodness I am not like that person over there, that tax collector, that sinner." Or maybe it's that we just don't want to sound judgmental, and so our Christian witness ends with the words, "Let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone," rather than the words, "Go and sin no more." Our Christian witness, modeled so perfectly in Jesus Christ, it is for us the blessed opportunity to speak the truth in love. To think and say and do and actually live in such a way that it is of benefit to others. And I know how easy it is to think to ourselves, "Well, my sphere of influence is pretty small. Now nothing I can do is going to make a big difference." And, if we are being honest with ourselves, it won't because, at the end of the day, we ourselves cannot accomplish anything of eternal significance, apart from the grace and favor of God!

I once heard a story of the well-known pianist, Ignace Jan Paderewski. It was told as if it were true. Though I suspect it could be a little bit of folklore. The story goes that his concert in New York had been sold out for months. On the night of the concert people came dressed in tuxedos and dresses. A mother also brought her six-year-old son, because he had begun to complain about his piano lessons and she was hoping that by hearing a great pianist, he might be motivated to keep practicing. Well, you can dress a six-year-old in a tuxedo, but he's still a six-year-old. Restless and impatient, he continually had to get up and go to the bathroom and much to the dismay of those sitting next to them, he kept walking back and forth in the aisle. Finally, the mother became exasperated. She grabbed her son by the shoulders and sat him down in a chair and said, "Don't move!" A few minutes later, the mother was distracted by the person sitting to her other side. The boy slipped out into the aisle. The mother turned to see her son walking toward the stage where the huge Steinway piano had been placed. Panicky, she yelled at the top of her whisper, "Come back here right now". Startled, the little boy panicked and he ran toward the stage, up the stairs and straight for the piano. He sat down and began to play "Chopsticks", of all things. The People, as you can imagine, in the audience, they were furious! All of the commotion it was heard by Paderewski in the dressing room, and as the ushers made their way to the stage, so did he. He walked to the edge of the backstage area. He put his tuxedo jacket on and he was in plain view of the audience. There was a collective hush. Everyone wondered

what the great pianist would do. The boy, oblivious to what was happening, he just continued to play. Paderewski came up behind and whispered in the little boy's ear, "Don't stop. Keep on playing. You're doing great!" The story goes that while the boy continued to play, as he did, Paderewski reached his arms around the boy and began playing a concerto based on the tune of "Chopsticks". While the two played, Paderewski kept saying to the boy, "Don't stop. Keep on playing."

Sometimes I feel like that is what God is saying to me. Perhaps, like some of you, what I say and do in my everyday life, at times it feels somewhat inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, like a childish rendition of "Chopsticks". But know this, God can use even our meager offerings of praise in significant ways! Our expressions of faith and hope and love. God sees them and God uses them! In the final chapter of Matthew's Gospel Jesus says: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them all that I have commanded you, and remember I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Now, we know from that passage and others from within the Biblical witness, that God remains very much active and at work in our life and in the life of the world. And, that blessed reality, it turns my attention back again to our New Testament Lesson and to those particular words that God spoke: "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again." You see, I think those words are still offered for our benefit; and I think those words are of great benefit to the world!

When we baptize(d) Hardy this morning, consider that it is in the waters of baptism that we make some very important affirmations and yet, just as surely as we declare that we are participating in Jesus' resurrection, we are also affirming that in baptism we are participating in Jesus' death? That's right! In this sweet, endearing and tender sacrament, it is yet another way by which we testify to God's glory on the cross. I found that Christianity is not just a vertical relationship from us to God. It is the glory of God that is also accomplished among us. Indeed, I can't think of anything God has said that doesn't have to do with someone else. So, keep playing. Not only because God has told us to play, but because God is also determined that in and through us, God will take the music of our singular instruments and turn them into a veritable symphony whereby God's name is glorified!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.