

Advent III Sermon 2 by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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It is not at all surprising that stewards and stewardesses demand now to be called Flight Attendants. When Paul describes himself as a steward, he uses a word which means the ruler of a house. The Greek word refers to the chief servant in a household. Paul does not claim for himself to be the head of the household of God, for that is Jesus Christ, but he is the servant set by the head to rule over the house. Our English word, steward, refers to something even more lowly. The steward was, first of all, the one who had ward of the sty. It is not at all shocking, then, that some people prefer to be called Attendant rather than Pig Keeper.

The Corinthian congregation was divided by their preferences for different Apostles. Paul tells them that he and the other apostles are no more than ministers and stewards, and

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no less than the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Along with the words of Jesus about John the Baptist, we have today a job description for the ordained ministers of the Church. They are stewards and ministers, sent to prepare for Christ's coming.

While our Lord holds John the Baptist out as a model, we cannot help but wonder what inner struggles John was undergoing in prison. He has been isolated in a dark cell for quite a while. We may suppose that he has grown impatient, wondering "if Jesus is really the One, why has the kingdom not come in its fullness and glory by now?" Or we might conjecture that John, who was so sure at the Jordan, has been troubled by doubts. Whatever we read into his sending of his followers seeking confirmation from Jesus, our Lord does not rebuke John. Rather, he praises him for his steadfastness, his

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asceticism, and his bold preaching. He is more than a prophet, for he is the last Old Testament prophet, and the first New Testament Apostle and Evangelist. He is more than just any prophet. He is that one and final prophet to go before the Lord, who comes in the same spirit and power as Elijah himself.

In our Epistle, Paul addresses the variety of judgments, opinions and impressions people had of him. “I don’t care what you think of me,” he writes, “I don’t care about any human opinion or taste or preference or judgment. Even my own opinion of myself doesn’t really matter. It’s the Lord who judges me.”

In the Gospel, similar questions come up about what people thought of John the Baptist. There is more than a hint of sarcasm in Jesus’ appraisal of what popular opinion of John might be. The questions that swirl around in these readings are: “What do you think of Paul?” and “What do you think about

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John the Baptist?” and even “What do you think of Jesus?” But these readings turn the tables quickly. Paul says, “It is the Lord who judges me.” It is not what I think of Paul or John, or finally what I think of Jesus, that matters. What matters is: what does Jesus think of me?

Do not pronounce judgment. That is the message that you and I, in this congregation, need to hear and to heed. Paul gives us three reasons why we are to suspend our judgment. First, it is not the time. This is the time to call to repentance and to preach the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Jesus’ name.

“Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes.”

Second, we are not competent judges, Paul says, even of ourselves, and at times least of all of ourselves. Our view and knowledge is always in part, but when the Lord comes and judges, he will see and know and show all. He is the one “who

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will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness.”

Third, we judge merely by what we see, but we are often ignorant of the circumstances and the heart behind the matter.

“The Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” (1 Samuel 16.7)

The Lord “will disclose the purposes of the heart” when he comes again to judge. “Therefore do not pronounce judgment (1) before the time, before the Lord comes, who will (2) bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will (3) disclose the purposes of the heart.”

Paul’s call reminds us of our Lord’s own words: “Judge not, that you be not judged.” And both times, the word in the Greek is the one from which we get the English word “criticize.”

There is among us a condemning, accusing, critical, fault-finding spirit, and it comes from below. Listen to our Lord.

“With the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the

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measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matthew 7.2-3) "Every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5.22)

Paul writes, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls." "Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. So each of us shall give account of himself to God. Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother." (Romans 14.4, 10, 12-13)

James writes, "There is one lawgiver and judge, he who is able

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to save and to destroy. But who are you that you judge your neighbor?" (James 4.12)

The invitation of John the Baptist is to repent. That means to give up judging one another, and to judge ourselves instead. That means to come and know ourselves as truly, inwardly and spiritually blind, lame, leprous, deaf, dead and poor. Only those who know themselves as such may know Jesus - the one by whom and in whom and through whom the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them.

It is the Lord who judges me. That is a dreadful thing to consider at first, but there is a liberty and a hope there as well. It is the Lord who judges me, and there is no other so loving, so forbearing, so gracious and so forgiving. It is the Lord who judges me, and he scatters all who would condemn me for ever.

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And what does he say? “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”