

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 65: 15-20
SECOND LESSON: 2 Corinthians 5:6-17
June 13, 2021

“Seeing and Being Seen”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

At the start of an important trial, a small-town attorney called his first witness to the stand. She seemed like a sweet, elderly woman. He approached her and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you recognize who I am?”

She responded, “Why, yes, of course I know who you are Mr. Williams. I’ve known you since you were a young boy. You’ve become a huge disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat on your wife, you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you’re a hot shot lawyer, when you haven’t the brains to realize you never will amount to anything more than a two-bit paper pusher. Yes, I know who you are.”

The lawyer was stunned. Not knowing what else to do he pointed across the room and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know the defense attorney?”

She replied, “Why, of course I do. I’ve known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster, too. I used to baby-sit him for his parents. And he, also, is a real disappointment. He’s lazy, bigoted, never has a nice word to say about anybody, and he drinks like a fish. He’s been divorced five times, and everybody knows that his law practice is one of the shoddiest in the entire state. Yes, I know who he is.”

The judge rapped his gavel, to quiet the laughter among the spectators in the courtroom. Once the room was silent, he called both attorneys to the bench. In a quiet, menacing voice, he warned, “If either of you asks her if she knows me, you’ll be jailed for contempt!”

Last week Paul referred to the body as a “tent.” The body is temporary accommodation. Today he confesses that he doesn’t really know which he prefers. Death doesn’t concern him at all, because if he dies he will be with the Lord. But if he lives he will be with the people he loves and serves. Either way, says Paul, the goal is the same—to live a life pleasing to God. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,” says Paul, “so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

Mrs. Jones aside, if anyone truly knows the truth about what we’ve done good or bad, it is the Lord. But Paul doesn’t answer the question of how “being with the Lord” immediately following death fits with the resurrection and final judgment, probably because he can’t. On the cross Jesus told the repentant

thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Elsewhere all the focus is on bodily resurrection. There is a tension there that we ignore, because we tend to ignore resurrection altogether and just focus on heaven. But the fact is, nobody knows how it all works, not even Paul. God exists outside of time, and our concepts can’t account for it all.

But Paul does mention judgment. Roman Catholics still place a lot of emphasis on judgment. Modern protestants have gone in the opposite direction, speaking so much about grace that we forget that there will be any judgment. We are forgiven by grace. But even if we go to heaven there will still be a reckoning. And this is mildly terrifying. Who among us wants all our hidden faults exposed? Even though salvation comes by grace, however, scripture does speak of judgment and varying degrees of reward. Nothing is hidden from God. And while it is terrifying, there is another way in which I find it comforting. I find it terrifying when it comes to myself. I find it comforting when I think of all the evil people in the world who have destroyed lives and then lied and denied that what they did ever happened. It’s the bold-faced lies and smear campaigns against the victims that make the crimes even worse from my perspective. Some will lie even when there is video evidence! All of the child abusers, torturers, murderers and dictators, all those who are supposed to protect but instead attack, all those who pretend to faithfully serve the public good but instead line their own pockets, and all of those who con the vulnerable in order to rob them of what they can ill afford to lose, ALL will have to face the truth. *They will be forced to face the truth, because the power of human denial will no longer be available to them.* Their minds will no longer be able to compartmentalize and shut it out. With open eyes and a mind no longer capable of screening out what they don’t want to acknowledge they will see, and they will know what they have really done and how it affected others. This, my friends, is hell, and it will be mitigated only if there has been repentance.

Paul had no qualms about facing judgment himself. He says that what he is, is plain to God. And he is trying, once again, to counter the opposition group who stepped into the church at Corinth and tried to take over. These interlopers pointed out that Paul did not exactly look like a success. He was poor. He had no fixed abode. He had the 1st century equivalent of a criminal record. And, they added, he was downright crazy. The Greek phrase is paraphrased as “out of our mind” but they really didn’t have to do that, because a more literal translation works just fine in English. He was “beside himself”.

Accusing people of being crazy is a good weapon. Anything they have to say is automatically discredited. Suddenly everything that person does acquires an aura of pathology. And Paul was such an intense person, it would have been an easy form of attack. But Paul didn’t allow it to penetrate. He turned it around by saying, “If we are “out of our mind,” as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.” The word for “right” is actually sober. Sober thinking is sane thinking. It means to act with good judgment and self-discipline.

To some Paul's theology would sound insane not sober. He was convinced that "one died for all, and therefore all died." He further argued that those for whom Christ died should no longer live for themselves, but for Christ. And he concludes with one of my favorite texts of scripture: "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

What does it mean to regard someone from a worldly point of view? It's not really too difficult to figure out. We are labeled right from the get-go. As soon as a child enters school they are judged by peers, teachers and administrators. Attractive or unattractive? Confident or shy? Awkward or poised? Bright or slow? Of course, the income and educational level of the parents along with other factors like race and ethnicity are included in this judgment. And "the world" can be brutal. Children are often identified as destined for a life of success or failure at a very young age. As we grow up the world continues to evaluate us by our people skills and intellect. On the Main Line the pressure to wear the "right" clothes is intense. And of course, the "right" clothes are always expensive. Birthday parties become a competition of popularity and wealth. After high school the divide grows ever larger between those who go to college and those who do not. Future blue-collar workers are treated differently from future white-collar workers. The fact that we even have such a distinction is telling. And we further divide colleges into those with status and those without status. The world wants to know if our educational pedigree is elite enough. Rarely will "the world" give anyone a second chance who has messed up. And underlying everything is money. How much money we earn determines how valuable we are.

But in Christ, none of that matters. God sees us as people, not commodities. We are children of God, not failures or successes, losers or winners. And God knows the potential that is in us that no one else sees. Once God's Spirit is at work in us new creation is happening. The broken is repaired. The missing is replaced. The wounded is healed. It is easier for this to happen in a person who admits they are broken than the one who is arrogant, because of course the arrogant one will be less open, but regardless the Spirit sees what is really there. Our worth is based on our character—not on what we own. Our worth is shown in how well we love others, not in how much we earn.

Paul's opponents sought to defame him and thereby weaken his position with the Corinthian congregation. They did this by using the tools of the world, because a man like Paul was not a success by the world's standards. But Paul refused to be evaluated by these hollow measures. He insisted upon being seen as God sees him, and seeing others as God sees them. He insisted that as Christians we are to regard no one from a worldly point of view. Worldly values are illusive and passing. Money and things do not transfer from this world to the next. Only character does. We can only take ourselves and who we become, and on that we will be judged, because God sees who we really are. Amen.

¹⁷ “See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

⁶ Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ For we live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.
¹¹ Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. ¹² We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. ¹³ If we are “out of our mind,” as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.
¹⁴ For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. ¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!