

Advent III Sermon 1 by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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Who do you think you are?

Who do I think I am?

We seem to swing back and forth, from a kind of crazed megalomania, to dreadfully tormented low self-esteem, unable to get it right. St. Paul wrote to the Romans, “I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.” Surely this sober judgment, which knows our own faults as well as the gift of our Creator and the grace of our Saviour in us, is part of that sound mind, that spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control, which God gives us.

But who do we think we are? So often by our thoughts and words and deeds, we proclaim and we pretend that we are the one and only, the Lord God Almighty, the Judge and ruler of all.

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For whenever we pronounce judgment - and what a helpful way of putting it that is in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible – to say that we pronounce judgment – it makes it clear that we are not talking about the suspension of critical faculties, and we are not talking about making no distinctions between good and evil, truth and lies, love and hatred, right and wrong. It is about pronouncing judgment, passing judgment...whenever we pronounce judgment, we are pretending to be God.

“You are not my judge,” Paul says to the Corinthians. Imagine him saying to them, “I don’t care what you think, especially of me.” And it’s not hard to imagine Paul saying that. Paul tells them, and us, that we are incompetent. That’s right, you and I are incompetent judges. In that brief Epistle reading, he lists three reasons why we should not pronounce judgment.

1. It is before the time. This is not the time to pronounce judgment, but rather the time to publish the good news. We

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must beware - and it is a special danger in our day - of sounding judgmental, for our message to the world is forgiveness and mercy, not judgment and condemnation. In all the moral confusions and decay of our age and society, the Christian message is not finally one of judgment, but of the saving and forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ. Our Gospel is not of law, but of grace. To drunks and adulterers, to cheats and liars, to thieves and abusers, to blasphemers and murderers, the Gospel is the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name. This is not the time for judgment, and we are not the judges.

Secondly, we are incompetent to judge anyone, even ourselves, because 2. we do not know those things hidden in darkness, so we never have the full picture, nor 3. do we know the purposes of the heart. Therefore, do not pronounce judgment 1. before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things 2. now hidden in darkness and will

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disclose 3. the purposes of the heart.

We are not the judges, and we are not to pronounce judgment, for it is the Lord who judges. It is the Lord who judges me and you. And this is part of the Gospel, for Jesus Christ the Lord shall come again to judge all, the living and the dead. On that day, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

Now, initially the idea of the last judgment ought to fill us with dread. It is, and will be, a day of wrath and mourning, a day of impending doom. Our moral bankruptcy, our debts and sins, will lie open on that day of reckoning and accounting. And to remember that God is our judge - our God who is a consuming fire - is a fearful thing. We stand now, and shall stand then, naked before God, and this moves us to plead for mercy. It is the Lord who judges me, and it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. If the righteous man is scarcely saved,

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where will the impious and sinner appear?

But this is good news indeed, that it is the Lord who judges me. For the one who will come again, to judge the living and the dead, is he who out of love for us, gave himself on the cross for us, that we might not be condemned but pardoned. That Christ the Lord shall come again to judge, is good news for those who know him as their Saviour. And it is his acquittal which counts for ever. It is the Lord who judges me, and that is liberating and hopeful news, for he is kinder and more forgiving than all of us put together. He loves us more than we love ourselves.

Our consciences condemn us, time and age and our past condemn us, our enemies condemn us, and sometimes even our families and friends condemn us. Remember the woman caught in adultery. There she was, naked, caught in the act, guilty, full of shame, surrounded by accusing fingers on the outside, and full of torment and fear inside. They bring her - in fact drag her

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- to Jesus the judge. They have made up their minds already, they each have the stone in their hands. They have judged her already, pronounced the sentence in their hearts, and they only look to him to reinforce their self-righteous condemnation of this sinner. And what does he do? He disarms the self-righteous. Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her. And then once they are all gone, she stands before him, Jesus Christ, the only one without sin, the only one who could condemn her, the one and only Judge of all. And what does he say to her? What does he say to you and me, but that saving and liberating word of forgiveness, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

Today, to you, this is the message: drop your stone, drop it. Drop it, and do not pronounce judgment, but rather hear and share the good news, that God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world. Jesus

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himself testifies of his mission: God sent the son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. And the only condemnation is then to refuse this offer of forgiveness, of salvation and redemption.

“Neither do I condemn you.” He spoke it, and I believe it and hope it. In the love of the Lord, in the love of the Lord Jesus both received and shared, we may have confidence in the day of judgment. For we know and receive and live in that mercy which triumphs over judgment. It is the Lord who judges me. Alleluia, come Lord Jesus!