

Listening for the Promise

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20) – September 22, 2024

“A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

– James 3:18 –

Justice or Mercy?

Who is my enemy? Strangely enough, that’s not a biblical question. I find it intriguing that a quibbler once asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” But no one ever seems to have asked for an enemy identification. We know who our enemies are — or do we?

One psalmist petitions, “O Lord, save me by your name and vindicate me by your might” and as for those enemies, “put an end to them” (Psalm 54:1, 5b). The prophet Jeremiah credits God with revealing his enemies’ evil deeds, at which the prophet prays, “[L]et me see your vengeance upon them” (Jeremiah 11:20b). The Old Testament is full of such prayers for retribution — humanly inspired and divinely implemented. With enemies clearly in their sights, petitioners appeal to God as Judge, Jury, and Executioner.

For followers of Jesus, the difficulty of these prayers is twofold: Either we empathize with their victim perspective and so pray for God’s vengeance on our own enemies, or we assume the judge’s position ourselves and condemn those petitioners who have obviously failed to be Christlike in attitude. But in both those temptations we are in danger of forgetting the cross. And the cross changes everything! At the foot of the cross, we see Jesus — only Jesus — exalted. There we see the Divine Sacrifice, submitted to God’s judgment and suffering for us. By the cross we are humbled; we dare not climb on the garbage heap of self-righteousness to condemn anyone.

Jesus tells his disciples in advance that he will soon be delivered into the hands of evil men who will kill him. The disciples might have shown some sympathy, if not empathy. But they don’t. Instead, they blow past his suffering and argue among themselves about who will be glorified with him. Knowing how blind they were to their own sins and how deaf they were to God’s word, Jesus takes up a defenseless child to shame them for their selfish ambition and show them the love that should humble them.

Lord, make us peacemakers as we see the enemy in ourselves and the mercy of God in Christ.

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