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I Corinthians Sermon Series #3

I Corinthians 6.1-8

“State of the Church: 3. What’s right about being wronged”

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I’ll never forget those three smiling faces on the billboard, right across the street from Pitt County Memorial Hospital. “PCMH,” as we called it, was a pretty important place for us. It was the largest employer in Greenville, North Carolina, where we lived, and so, together with the tobacco industry it more or less drove the local economy (a fairly strange economic partnership, I know!). It was also a prominent feature along my commute to work, and it was where two of our children were born. It seemed so much a part of our lives, in fact, that as we were driving out of town on the way to our new home in Cincinnati, we paused to take a few snapshots of those hallowed buildings. Also, I glanced down the street to get once more glimpse of those three faces keeping watch over all the hustle and bustle of medical activity: all the patient pain and nurses’ care, all the diagnoses wedged into frenzied schedules, all the careful but hurried sterilization, the chart reading and x-raying and scalpel-wielding—and the mistakes.

These faces were the faces of lawyers, as you may have guessed, perched right at the edge of the medical camp, reassuring aching patients that they had recourse, and warning all who enter to be on the lookout for various forms of incompetence. I know that there were those in the medical community that probably hated the faces of these opportunistic intruders hovering over them—I remember church members where Michelle served talking under their breath about those “ambulance chasers.” But it always seemed to me that these faces belonged there, that they were as much a part of the overall healthcare system as were the hospital administrators, and even the nurses and the doctors. Wherever they may have fallen on the sliding scale between lofty idealism and crude cynicism (and let’s face it, these were not exactly civil rights attorneys waging noble battles for social justice), these three faces were there to make sure that everyone knew, professionals as well as clients, that bare efficiency wasn’t going to operate in that hospital unchallenged. Patients are persons, and they aren’t going to be squeezed through the system like so many anonymous parts on an assembly line. Patients are persons, and those persons have rights, said the three smiles through subtly gritted teeth, and those rights are going to have to be respected, at least while we’re watching—and we’re *always* watching.

Now, that’s not to say that current laments about everything being driven by the threats and the costs of litigation don’t hit the mark. It’s not to say that it isn’t regretful that hospitals are being pressured into steering clear from lawsuits to such a degree that expenses escalate out of control and physicians’ hands are tied in pursuing their patients’ well-being. It’s not to say that those smiling faces aren’t looking down on a royal mess that they themselves have had a hand in creating.

It’s also not to say that these faces aren’t evidence of a troubling trend in our culture: an obsession for getting what is mine, for finding the culprit for my personal suffering and making her pay, for turning tragedy into a score to be settled. A frantically litigious society is a rationalist society, a society which refuses to acknowledge gaps or even in lags in the cycle of goodness and reward or mistakes and punishment, that refuses to accept that sometimes things just turn out badly despite our best efforts. It is a society in which the books of good and evil have to balance, a society which is in danger not only of frittering away its resources in courts, but of losing touch with the frailties and the uncertainties of the human condition. It is a society which smilingly forgets that the joys and sufferings of human life are never quite in balance—and forgets, therefore, about such humanly important virtues as compassion, forgiveness, grace.

Just as important, an overly litigious society is a society in which the language of service-oriented public morality which has been so important to our civic life is quickly being exchanged for the language of personal rights. “Getting one’s due” is the sum total of what we should strive for. Evaporating is any sense of the

common good and how I am obligated to support it. Politically unthinkable now is the civic wisdom which once urged to “ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.” Idealists as different as Kennedy and Reagan are quoted by contemporary politicians when it is convenient, but quotes like this are repeated anymore only by preachers, professors, and other “do-gooders” who don’t need votes.

The Apostle Paul is in the midst of a prolonged tirade about sexual misconduct when he pauses to chastise his Corinthian audience for a recent flurry of lawsuits between them. What he seems to be worried about is the church’s reputation, and maybe that’s the mental connection that launches him into this topic: sex and lawsuits can both be rather embarrassing, I guess. What will it look like to people outside when they see behavior that is scandalous even to them, and what will it look like when members of a community which claims to love each other show up in court, pointing fingers and demanding that wrongs be righted? These are issues, Paul says, which should be settled “in house,” “behind closed doors.”

But then he says something interesting. “Why not rather be wronged?” he asks. It is a question that he drops as if it were obvious. But it probably strikes us as a note from another world, a bolt from the blue, an off note in our melody of justice. “Why not rather be wronged?” It isn’t the question you’ll ever see on a billboard outside a hospital, or hear in a political speech. It isn’t a question which our culture ever teaches us to ask. It is foreign, counterintuitive, absurd. “Why not rather be wronged? More like, why would you ever allow yourself to be wronged?” But I suggest that if we take the question seriously, and not as merely rhetorical, it raises a basic and very important issue for us, an issue we need badly to consider in a litigious age such as ours: are there things you would sacrifice your rights for? Not in some grand political sense where you sign your rights over to a government or even to a church, mind you (I don’t think we should ever do that!)—but are there occasions when you would not press your case, though it is solid, because there is something greater at stake? I’m not suggesting that the answer should always or even most often be positive, but the inability to ask it is a mark of spiritual and moral immaturity, a failure of an imagination that has not waded out past the shallowness of our “me first” culture.

Political theorist Michael Walzer distinguishes between what he calls “thin” and “thick” moralities, and suggests that each is appropriate in its own sphere. In the public realm, we need a “thin” morality which outlines a few basics, a few principles and basic rights, things that we can agree upon in order to protect each other from those whose economic, political or even religious power may place us at their mercy. The Bill of Rights is a classic example of some elements of a “thin” morality. But a “thin” morality is never enough, because it doesn’t tell us what we should ultimately live for. By itself, a “thin” morality is one which doesn’t challenge our basic selfishness. Without some other source of value to supplement it, we can easily come to see life as simply a matter of protecting my rights against someone else’s power—that is, life can be construed as a matter of getting what’s mine.

So we need a “thick” morality, too, and we only get that from groups that we join that can teach how we ought to live. A “thick” morality teaches us about what moral “excellence” or “virtue” means, about duty and about the advantages of going beyond it, about the shape of the good community toward which we should be striving together.

I believe that our culture is in danger of reducing morality to the “right to get what’s mine” in part because of our lack of commitment to groups which can foster a “thicker,” more robust and much more impressive vision of how we might live. The vision of the good life that is shared in community is one of its treasures, a treasure that is being thrown away, sacrificed on the altar of personal “rights.”

In a way, I think that what Paul is urging is that the Corinthians not throw away their treasure—that they not sacrifice the thick wisdom of the church for a few bucks and the satisfaction of exacting revenge on someone who has hurt them. He is urging them to reflect on the folly of the cross, the symbol of one who was wronged to death for, as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, the “joy” set before him. There is more at stake in their

squabbles than the embattled Corinthians may have realized: there is the opportunity to learn how to live counterintuitively: compassionately, graciously, like the servants of Jesus Christ that they were.

Since in recent years we have witnessed abuse at the hands of a defensive and self-justifying church, not only the catholic church in America but the reformed church in South Africa, I want to be clear that I am not saying that Scripture is urging us to allow ourselves to be walked on, or to sweep the abuse of the innocent under the carpet. Keeping things “in house” works only when those in the house don’t fail to do what is right. When they do fail, secular courts may be God’s instruments, whether or not the church’s reputation suffers.

But, again, the issue isn’t only reputation. Paul urges the Corinthians to settle their matters “in house” because relying on church discipline is a fundamentally different way of pursuing justice than filing cases in court. In our culture, what matters is getting one’s due and punishing those who infringe on our rights. But in the church, what matters are not only the rights of those who are wronged, but the well-being of those who are wronged *and* those who *do* wrong. In the church, compassionate concern is to be offered to the offender *as well as* to the offended. And that’s because, in the church, justice isn’t a zero sum game, a balance sheet that has to be reconciled. In the church, moral failure is recognized as a fundamental feature of the human condition that afflicts all of us and not something that renders a person unworthy of our care and concern. In the church, justice is what the Jewish tradition calls “shalom,” wholeness and restoration for the entire community.

As odd as it sounds to contemporary ears, for those schooled in the way of Jesus, justice is the pursuit of grace. And it is just this counterintuitive bit of moral wisdom which reflects once again the folly of the cross. And we modern Christians need to ask ourselves, whether or not we ever intend to sue anybody, are we willing to follow Christ to that degree, embracing that standard of justice? In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.