

## The Judgment of Judging<sup>1</sup>

The Resurrection of Jesus is so grand and so deep that no one sermon could exhaust its meaning. I thought about all the sermons that could be preached and are being preached this morning about Jesus' return from death. In many churches, they are celebrating the fact that the ultimate power of death was broken by Jesus' coming back from death. Many churches will be talking about how Jesus' resurrection establishes God's reign—or Kingdom—in the world. A slightly more sophisticated sermon would proclaim that by bringing Jesus back, God certified the rightness of what Jesus taught and did. In other words, Jesus decision to go to Jerusalem wasn't a grand mistake, but exactly what God wanted. I'm certain that all of these themes will be lifted up from pulpits and on the radio, in Sunday School classes, and discussion groups this morning.

The Easter theme I'd like to talk about this morning tends to escape our notice. We miss it, I believe, because there is an important difference between ourselves and those who heard the first resurrection sermon preached by Peter several weeks after the first Easter. That crowd—and it was a large crowd that Peter preached to—that crowd would have understood vividly what I'm trying to talk about because they were the very ones who were responsible for rejecting and killing Jesus in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on March 23, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga.

Listen to how Peter confronts their guilt as he preaches to the masses in Jerusalem. He says, in effect to the Jerusalem crowd: "You know who I'm talking about...this man handed over to you according to God's plan. You crucified and killed him through the instrumentality of the Roman justice system.

I'm imagining people in the crowd suddenly aware of their faces flushing hot and red because Peter was talking right to them. Imagine who they might be. There was the one who had been in the Good Friday crowd screaming, "crucify;" the religious official who was in one of the back room meetings when it was decided that Jesus must go; the teenage boys who had a prurient interest in the scene of Jesus' execution and with mock bravado went to check it out; the upright citizen who wasn't a part of the crowd in the streets, but who offered in polite conversation the opinion that something had to be done about the Jesus of Nazareth problem.

Think, the very ones who were the rejecters, the judgers, the haters, and the crucifiers were the first congregation who heard the first resurrection.

So, what's my Easter theme today—Easter means rejection is rejected. The judgers must now encounter their victim. When Peter preached to the big crowd in Jerusalem, they weren't thinking blue sky theological thoughts like the resurrection is the provisional expression of the eschaton now to be realized in the ecclesia—the

called out community of the new Israel. No, they were thinking, "Oh my gosh—he's back!"

Now, we would expect that if our victim comes back, he comes back literally, with a vengeance. But that's not what happens. Jesus comes back to call Jerusalem, his rejecters, into relationship and discipleship. The rejecters, the judges, the killers of Jesus are the first called to give up rejecting, judging, and killing and to become his people—forever.

By the way, if someone who didn't make it here this morning asks what we talked about tell him or her this: resurrection is the judgment of judging. Because the judged one came back not to judge but to embrace all who would forsake judging.

At the risk of oversimplification, I submit that the worst thing that we can do to one another is to reject one another. Steal something from me, inconvenience me, nag me, work me to death, argue with me, break promises, lie to me, offend me, insult me, and I just may be able to endure it. But cut me out of your life and you've delivered the hardest blow of all.

Answer for yourself—what's the hardest part of getting a divorce, losing a job, or having a falling out with a friend? Is it having no paycheck or support? Is it the loss of status? No! It's the thought that somebody doesn't want me anymore.

Rejection may be the most difficult of experiences, but how often do we contemplate using it anyway. Have you ever plotted getting rid of someone as a solution to problems? In the workplace, someone doesn't blend or is difficult to work with, and then comes the plotting—maybe we need to get rid of him.

Now, I'm not talking about killing someone or even firing or divorcing someone. How about socially acceptable ways to reject someone? The social invitations just stop coming. People don't phone any more. Suddenly, a family member or old friend gets too busy to keep up a relationship and they quietly drift out of your life.

The very brainy and wise popular theologian, Dallas Willard has suggested that withdrawal is closely related to the sin of cruelty. How can this be true? Because, when we withdraw from someone, we assault the part of them that makes them human. That part is the essential human need to be connected with other people. To withhold that is like withholding food or oxygen.

None of us think of ourselves as cruel people. But there is a deep cruelty in, "I think I don't want anything to do with him or her or them."

Now, if I'm correct that rejection is a cruel assault on a person, we can see Jesus' experience in this world with fresh eyes. Isaiah 53 prophetically sums up Jesus' life. "He was despised and

rejected by men. John one: "He came to his own and they received him not." In the passion narrative, the reality of rejection is repeated over and over lest we miss the point: Let me string together some phrases from the story of Jesus' trial and execution.

Judas sold him and kissed him off...the disciples forsook him and fled...I do not know the man...sought false testimony against him so they might put him to death...bound Jesus and led him away...delivered him to Pilate...said Pilate, "Take him yourselves and judge him...cried out, "away with him, crucify...Pilate sent him over to Herod...Herod sent him back to Pilate...they cried, "not this man, but Barabbas...take him yourselves and crucify...and he delivered him up to be crucified, Jesus bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Jesus knows rejection. But instead of sour grapes or retaliation, the victim of rejection comes back and invites us to join him in forever setting aside judging and rejection and withdrawal and unforgiveness.

If Jesus can come back in love first of all to those who reared the cross, then a new order of reconciliation has dawned in this world.

What are we supposed to do with all of this? Well...I'm guessing that maybe a couple of us, maybe more, are having the thought these days that if we could just have nothing further to do with someone, then things would be better. If we could just pull back, just stop the unproductive talk, just not have to see that person, just not put up with his garbage any more, just quietly end the relationship then

things would be so much better. The problem with that thought is that Jesus came back to his rejecters. It's called Easter. And what Peter says is "repent"—that is "think again." When that Jerusalem crowd heard "repent"—they knew exactly what it meant for them. If you and I can simply say deep inside, "No, rejection is not my answer." If we can do simply that, I believe that Easter—the real deal with new life and a new reality—will have dawned in our hearts.