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Feb. 27, 2011

1 Corinthians 4:1-5, Isaiah 55: 6-9

Finding Our Place

The passage from 1 Corinthians that I read this morning is not a well-known verse. It's not often preached on. But as we read our way through First Corinthians in the lectionary this year, here it is.

I read it through several times, praying it through as I do the scripture every week and I listened for God's voice speaking to me in it.

And I was stuck. I didn't hear much there that said anything to me.

And then I went to the hospital on Wednesday and sat with my sister as our mom was in surgery. Then the two of us sat with my mom as she began to wake up and then all through Thursday we were together.

And in the quiet moments when my mom slept, I thought about this sermon and wondered what there was to talk about in this passage that would be relevant and meaningful to you---and not only to you but to me as well.

Because I am not the only one here who has been spending time with loved ones in hospitals and nursing facilities. And spending time with loved ones who are struggling somehow opens up questions and concerns and realities that really open up doors in our hearts and souls to places we would really rather not go.

And as I sat down and read the words of Apostle Paul again, I found something there I need to hear and that I believe that some of you need to hear as well.

The first line says, "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries."

The key phrase in that sentence for me today is "God's mysteries." There are a lot of things about God that we do not understand and cannot understand, maybe not ever, but certainly not in this life.

We can ask why do people suffer, why do people get sick, why do bad things happen to good people, and there is only one thing I know about that----

And that's that we don't know why. It's one of the mysteries of God that we don't have an answer to.

So somehow we have to learn to live with the mystery of God, the mystery that IS God!

And Paul says that we are stewards of that mystery. Stewards take care of, watch over, guard and protect, and so we need to take care of the mystery. We can do this NOT by trying to explain everything, but by knowing that it's okay not to understand everything.

And then we read further ----

“Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.”

We can be found trustworthy by not trying to explain away the mysteries of God, and by not assuming that we understand or that we need to spend any time explaining those mysteries to anyone else.

Instead, we can be stewards of God's mysteries by believing and by behaving as though it's okay not to understand them!

When we ask questions, and when others are asking the question, when anyone is looking for the higher purpose of tragedies and other difficulties, we can remember that God is God and we are not. We don't need to explain away the difficulties of our lives. We need to know that God is still with us.

Now what Paul says next didn't quite make sense to me at first. It seemed like there was a jump from talking about being trustworthy stewards of God's mysteries to talking about being judged.

There is a backstory there between Paul and the church in Corinth. Maybe he had been accused of not being trustworthy or of being wrong in the way he preached the Gospel.

Scholars can speculate and propose scenarios and try to explain this leap, but as I listened for the message for me here, I finally made a connection.

Paul says, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me."

It's not your place to judge me. It's not my place to judge you. It's not our place to judge anyone else.

Only God can judge anyone.

Because God alone is good. God alone is without sin. All of us are living in the same world, sharing the same sinful nature, the same human weaknesses.

All of us have an imperfect, incomplete view of the world

and of each other. Only God sees what is in our hearts and souls.

Only God sits on the throne of judgment, and only God possesses infinite mercy and wisdom, grace and love.

It's not our place, that judgment seat.

And so we have to find our place, our place as stewards of God's mystery.

Paul continues----

“Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.”

Any judgment that we might make is not only stepping out beyond our rightful place as stewards and servants. It's not only moving into God's rightful position as the only judge. It's also premature.

God will judge when “the Lord comes.” That time is one of the mysteries of God.

Even Jesus said that he doesn't know the day or the hour, but only God the Father knows it. There is more than one way of thinking about the time when the Lord comes, and no one really knows what to expect or when to expect it.

Some people believe Christ will come down from heaven on a cloud and lift up all believers into the air. Others believe that time comes to each one of us individually, either as we first accept Christ as our savior or as we each face our own death.

Which one of the beliefs about the time of the Lord's coming is the right belief? That is one of God's mysteries, and I cannot say that one way of believing is right and another is wrong. It's not for any one of us to judge that. It's not our place.

And so we wait for the time, for God's time.

Because when the Lord comes again, he "will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart."

It's not our place to judge because we don't see everything clearly. There are things that are hidden in the darkness of this world. There are secrets that are hidden in our hearts that no one except God can know.

I have heard a saying, "Be gentle with others because everyone you meet is fighting some sort of battle."

We cannot know what another person is going through, what they are struggling with, what has just happened to them. And this is why it's not our place to judge them, because we cannot know their hurts, their losses, their scars.

I have also heard that something like 80% of what others say to you is not about you. Even if they seem very angry and critical of you, it's really about something else that's happened to them, some unrelated hurt from somewhere else, maybe from a long time ago.

If we can remember that and respond with grace instead of taking things personally, we will be far less hurt ourselves. We will be more able to respond to evil with good, to anger with love.

And we can break the cycle of pain instead of perpetuating it.

And all because we do not judge, but accept the mystery that there are many things that only God can know.

And when we accept that mystery it becomes easier to live in love and wait for the light of God to shine in the darkness and for what is in our own broken hearts to be known by God.

We wait not only with patience but also with hope.

Because the end of the passage is this---

“Then each one will receive commendation from God. “

Not just the best or the most holy. Not just the leaders. Not just people in some exclusive club or the ones who have done a particularly wonderful, high-visibility ministry, but “each one will receive commendation from God.”

“Each one”! God will judge us all, and each one will receive commendation!

God in mercy and grace will commend each one of us for whatever we have done to serve, to love, to follow, to bring ourselves closer to the heart of God.

Judgment is not harsh in the hands of a merciful, good God who is love.

Judgment is filled with honesty and grace, compassion, understanding and forgiveness.



This short passage takes us, then, on quite a journey.

From stewardship to commendation, from God's mysteries to God's mercy and grace.

And along that journey we find our place.

That place is not a place from which to judge either ourselves or others. It is a place of serving Christ and to take care of and guard the sacredness of the mysteries of God.

It is a place of living in the mystery without needing to make judgments or even to try to find understanding.

Our place is a place of waiting for God's time even as we live in human time.

Our place is a place of hope where we wait for God's judgment knowing that each one, that everyone, will receive a commendation from God for the service and stewardship we have rendered.

Our place is at the feet of God, surrounded by mystery and covered with grace, compassion, mercy, and love.

Amen.