

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think I need to talk about the news this past week, specifically the scandal surrounding the governor of Virginia, Ralph Northam. Have you been following that? A little over a week ago some pictures came to light of the governor in an old yearbook – either college or medical school, I’ve heard conflicting reports – in which he appeared either in blackface or in a KKK hood. Again, not clear. I guess he initially apologized, but then later said that neither of the people in that photo was him. But then he went on to say that he did put on blackface at around that time when he dressed up as Michael Jackson for a dance contest. And I believe he apologized for that. At any rate, I’m not so much interested in the details of this scandal as I am in what it says about our political and social culture at the moment, and how it stands in contrast with our readings this morning.

Sociologists who study the Bible and the cultures of the ancient world have taught us that honor and shame were overriding concerns in the culture that Jesus was born into. I commented a couple of weeks ago in the children’s sermon how shameful it would have been for the grooms family to run out of wine at a wedding party. That might seem silly to us, but it would have reflected very badly on them. It would have diminished the family’s status in their town. People would talk. They’d be looked down on. They might be shunned. Maybe it would have reflected on their next son or daughter and their marriage prospects.

I’ve know this since my seminary days. For I long time I thought that it was something that made the ancient world different from the modern world. But in recent years it has begun to dawn on me that our culture is not entirely different in this respect. Maybe not when it comes to throwing wedding parties, but certainly in the political sphere. Political opponents routinely try to find “dirt” on one another so that they can “bring them down.” Oppo research, it’s called. If you can find out that your opponent did something to be ashamed of, you can use it against them. And often there is no recovering from the damage of such revelations. In an op-ed piece on the current scandal in Virginia, one commentator, who writes on both religion and race, wrote this this past week: “In the church of the modern-day media, there is no room for redemption. We have a zero-tolerance policy against anyone caught being a racist. They can apologize profusely without any denials or rationalizations, but they will most likely be banished from public life.”¹ As an African American, this commentator was concerned that such an unforgiving approach was superficial, didn’t get to the root of the problem, and could prove to be damaging to the larger goal of promoting civil rights. He note that people like President Lyndon Johnson, who worked to get the Civil Rights Act passed, Justice Hugo Black, who struck down Jim Crowe in the South, and Abraham Lincoln, who freed the slaves, all were each avowedly racist themselves at one point in their lives. By today’s standards they would have been driven from office.

All three of our readings this morning seem relevant to this cultural moment in 21st century America. The first reading from Isaiah is the famous vision of the heavenly throne room where God and the angels hang out. And just as an aside, that song that the heavenly host sings in the presence of God, “Holy, holy, holy...” – that’s what we sing every Sunday at the beginning of the “Meal” portion of our service and we prepare to meet God face to face in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Isaiah finds himself in the presence of God, and he suddenly experiences himself to be unworthy. Almost the same dynamic happens with Peter in the Gospel

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/03/us/racist-photo-northam-blake-analysis/index.html>. Accessed 2/8/19.

reading after Jesus helps them to haul in a miraculous catch of fish. Peter know himself to be in the presence of the Holy One, and immediately becomes acutely aware of his own sinfulness. And finally, Paul, in the our continuation of 1 Corinthians, calls himself “the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” It’s not that Isaiah, and Peter, and Paul are being socially appropriate by humbling themselves. I think they each truly mean what they say in recognizing their own sin. And God does *not* say to them in any of these cases, “Oh, don’t be silly. You’re not that bad. Have some self esteem!” Their sinfulness and unworthiness is not contradicted. They are sinful. And yet in each case, God calls them into service. Isaiah is ritually purified by the coal touched to his lips. Remember, this is a vision. I don’t think he actually had his lips burned. But it speaks of forgiveness. And so do the stories of both Peter and Paul. In Paul’s case, he has repented of former life and been transformed by the grace of God. And as for Peter, well we don’t know the details at this point in the story, but we do know that he will eventually deny and abandon Jesus, and that Jesus will forgive him. And all three of these avowedly sinful men God calls into service, in spite of their sinfulness. Because if God is going to work through human beings, well sin comes with the territory. There are no other kinds of humans than sinful ones.

What do I want us to do with all of this? What is the point in juxtaposing the case of the Virginia governor with those of Isaiah, Peter, and Paul? Do I think that we should give politicians a pass on all their misdeeds, that nothing should disqualify them from office? That we should always just forgive? I don’t think it’s that simple. And that was the point of the commentator I mentioned a moment ago. I don’t know whether it would be best for the governor of Virginia to resign or not, and he doesn’t either. As he wrote, that’s really up to his constituents to decide. There’s a fine line between forgiveness and enabling, and that takes wisdom and discernment to sort out. And it’s not for me to forgive him, or for you. It is for those he has wronged. And in any case, I don’t think forgiveness works very well when it is forced.

What I do want us to see is that if God had held Isaiah, Peter, and Paul to the same unforgiving standard that is pushed in our political culture these days – for better or for worse, none of them would have been called into God’s service. But God chose to forgive them. And I’m going to guess that in the case of Paul that was a hard thing for some in the early church to accept. Paul’s role in the persecution was no trivial thing. It’s likely that he was responsible for the deaths of some of those Christians. And I can imagine that some may never have found it in their hearts to forgive him. That might have been a factor in Paul and the original disciples agreeing to split up in their missionary efforts. That’s just speculation, but I think it’s a fallacy to think that the early church was somehow purer than the church in our own time.

I think that God is just as grieved by the evil we inflict upon one another as we are. I think that God intends for racism, and sexism, corruption, oppression, and greed to end, and for all people to live lives of dignity and meaning. But God also sees forgiveness as the only way forward for us. The damage we have done is too great for anything else. So God comes among us in Jesus Christ to take upon himself the consequences of our sin and to destroy the power of sin, death, and evil through his death and resurrection. His sacrifice opens the way for true reconciliation with God and one another. That’s a long messy process with no easy fixes, but it comes with the promise that Jesus is with us in that struggle for the long road.

So let us take heart in that promise. May it open our hearts to God’s future, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.