

What's the Difference?

In the name of him who made peace for us with God by shedding his blood on the cross, dear friends in Christ: If you've been away from the planet for the past several months you may not know that one time sports legend, turned mediocre actor, and (most people believe) cold blooded killer O. J. Simpson is back on trial again. This time he stands accused of armed robbery and kidnapping related to an assault he led on some shady sports memorabilia dealers. Actually, all of the characters in the drama are pretty shady. I suppose it has something to do with "birds of a feather flocking together". Anyway, as this latest O. J. saga continues to unfold one comment I keep hearing over and over again is, "Maybe this time he'll get the justice he deserves."

I remember quite distinctly watching twelve years ago as the verdict of his murder trial was announced. I actually felt sick to my stomach when I heard the jury foreman say, "not guilty". It was unbelievable. The evidence of guilt was overwhelming. In order to believe the defense's weird conspiracy theory, you'd have to accept the self-contradicting notion that the same police who were so incompetent that they couldn't even tie their own shoes were somehow capable of masterminding a brilliant and airtight frame up job. It made no sense whatsoever. And yet, at the end of the day, O. J. stepped out of the courtroom a free man. I don't think I'm the only one who stood there in numb shock thinking, "That guy just got away with murder." It felt so wrong. And I think that's why people are so interested in this latest case, which comparatively speaking, doesn't amount to much. It's just that this time around we want to be reassured that there *is* some justice in the world. And I think too that maybe we have a nagging doubt that he's going to get away with it again.

That really burns us up, doesn't it? Because it isn't just about O. J. It's about our whole sense of the way the world ought to be. It seems to happen way too often that bad people get away with their crimes. Crooks and killers get off on technicalities. Celebrities get off on their good looks and charm. Organized crime figures get off by using bribes and intimidation. And some get off because they can afford to. We watch in disgust as corporate CEOs steal hundreds of millions from the companies they're supposed to be managing; and then, *if* they get caught, and *if* they actually get tried, they get fined a few hundred thousand and spend six months in a low security prison. Upon release they retire with their ill-gotten gains to some Caribbean island where they spend their days sitting with their feet in the warm water by their beachfront mansions sipping exotic cocktails from coconuts. Meanwhile thousands of their former employees are out the pensions they spent a lifetime building. They spend their retirement years working at Wal-Mart or MacDonal'd's. Where's the justice in that? And at the same time, we have the sense that if anyone of us who don't have seven-digit salaries were to do so much as to declare a questionable deduction on our taxes, the IRS would come down on us like a ton of bricks. Why is it that the justice system seems to work *too well* when we're the ones who step a bit over the line? It's frustrating, isn't it?

And could it be that this sense of frustration sometimes spills over into our life in the church? I mean here we are. We're trying to do the right thing. We're here this morning in part because we know we ought to be here – it's basic third commandment stuff: keeping the Sabbath Day holy and not despising God's Word and all. And we're trying to lead God-pleasing lives. We endeavor to flee temptations. We avoid excesses. We do our best to say no to the fleeting pleasures of sin. And we shoulder extra responsibilities. Life in the church means sacrificing our time; not just for the worship hour, but for other things. So we pony up to do our share (and often what seems to be more than our share): serving on boards, teaching Sunday school, serving on the altar guild, hosting the fellowship time, helping out in a hundred different ways – both here *and* at the school – all those extra jobs and fundraisers—not to mention financially supporting both operations at significant personal expense (okay, I guess I did mention it). But sometimes altogether it makes us feel like that mythical character Atlas whose job it was to keep the sky from falling.

And *then*, and then we look at some of our neighbors who don't concern themselves one iota about any of this stuff. They sleep in on Sunday mornings. They do what they want when they want with whomever they want – and they don't care if their "self-righteous" Christian neighbors think it's a sin. And they don't have any

of these churchly responsibilities, so they have a lot more free time to indulge themselves in whatever they want to do – and a lot more money to do it with. All the while they think you're foolish for doing what you do. Sometimes they'll even tell you so. And that's just to speak of some of our neighbors around here. You think of our cultural icons: the rich and famous, the actors and celebrities, the musicians and sports heroes, the writers and thinkers and commentators and philosophers ... a lot of these people are openly hostile to our Christian faith. They laugh at our "old fashioned" moral values. They think we're a bunch of fools for believing what we do. But despite their flagrant disregard for the Lord and his Word, God's sun continues to shine on them. His rain waters their fields and the vast lawns that surround their lavish homes. They continue to prosper and do well. They certainly seem happy most of the time.

And when we're looking at them living it up as they do while perhaps feeling a bit exasperated about this burden we bear of being faithful Christians it's easy to slip into self-pitying mode and start asking ourselves, "What's the difference?" "If God is going to go on blessing those unbelievers and mockers the same or even better than me, why am I knocking myself out?" "What's the point of trying to stay on the straight and narrow – and all the work and sacrifices that go with it – if there's no discernable benefit?"

Have you ever felt that way? Can you relate to any of this? If so, you're not alone. God's faithful people have felt this way from the very beginning. Just ask Abel who was despised and killed by his own brother for the crime of serving the Lord in an acceptable way. That happened near the very beginning of the Old Testament. And it's the complaint we hear from God's people in this morning's reading from the last book of the Old Testament. It's in the time of the prophet Malachi who wrote about four hundred years before the birth of Jesus. And the people were saying then, "It's useless to serve God. What do we gain from our keeping up the Temple and the worship that we do here – walking about as if in mourning all the time with this repentance over sin we're supposed to be doing? Meanwhile we watch as evildoers prosper and while those who insult us and our God escape the justice they deserve."

So there's nothing new about the feeling or the complaint; but here we want to be very careful. It's clear from this morning's reading that the Lord does not appreciate hearing this complaint from his people. He takes it personally; as well he should, because people who say or feel such things are accusing him of being incompetent, unjust, and uncaring. Moreover, they're on the brink of giving up. They're essentially saying, "Why shouldn't we abandon our worship of God and give into all the temptations that tickle our fancies since in the end it makes no difference? What is the difference? Both sinners and the righteous are getting the same reward—so why not give into sin? Why not forget all this church stuff and enjoy life while we can?"

You see, the temptation is to give up the faith because there are no visible, tangible, earthly rewards. But faith, as we know, is the substance of things not seen, the certain hope of things not yet possessed. To have faith in God means to trust in him and his love and his ultimate justice despite what we see. And so, we're told that hearing these complaints and accusations against God swirling around them – and no doubt feeling them themselves, "Those who feared the Lord talked with one another." Now, we're not told what exactly they said, but the fact that they feared the Lord says that they remained faithful. No doubt they rejected those accusations against God. They did not let them take root in their hearts and grow. Instead, they plucked them out like weeds and cast them away. And certainly, their conversation was encouragement about the Lord. They gathered together and spoke of his love, his justice, and the fact that he always keeps his promises. Or say it another way, they continued to worship God and hear his Word. They built themselves up in the faith. And so, doing, they kept the hope alive that, as God had said, the day would surely come when the difference between sinners and the righteous would be clearly seen.

We're told that the Lord took note of whom they were and that he paid attention to what they were saying. He ordered their names to be recorded in his book of remembrance – a book we know better as the Lamb's Book of Life. They trusted the Lord despite the lack of justice they saw in the world around them, and they believed that if God was not yet displaying a distinction between those who serve him and those who do not, well, then even though we don't know what it is, he must have a good reason for it.

It turns out that he did. We see it (or rather, we don't really see it) in today's reading from St. Luke's Gospel. It's part of Luke's account of our Lord's passion, a story we all know well. But I want you to consider a moment what you'd see if you didn't know the story so well, say, if were just a casual onlooker in the crowd

that day. Tell me, what would you see? You'd see three convicted criminals being crucified – three men in writhing agony while they underwent the most ingenious form of torturing a person to death the wicked minds of men have ever conceived. Here is justice on display for you: evil getting paid its just rewards. And what would be the observable difference between these three men? There wouldn't be any, would there? They'd all look pretty much the same. If anything, you might conclude that the battered man heaving himself in death's throes in the center was the worst of the three because he had obviously been the target of the most severe punishment. The taunts and jeers of the angry crowd reveling in his suffering would also lead you to conclude that this man was the by far most hated, and that account of it, he must have done something unspeakably awful. That's what the evidence would suggest, anyway. That's what you'd see.

But you'd be dead wrong, wouldn't you? We know by faith that the man in the center was the only perfectly righteous man who ever lived. He had never sinned in his life. He had only done others good. He had only spoken the truth. And yet here he was dying like a notorious felon. No apparent difference whatsoever. So we see that God does indeed have a purpose in not making the distinction between the saint and the sinner obvious. He doesn't single out the righteous for better treatment. No, instead he gives the only truly righteous One the just death that sinners deserve. While he prays for them, "Father, forgive them", they mock him saying, "He saved others, let him save himself." The irony is that by not saving himself he is answering his own prayer by shedding his blood to earn their forgiveness and save them. But again, you would never have known that by what you saw.

But let's take it a step farther and consider the other two convicts who are crucified with him. What's the observable difference between them? None. Just two rotten sinners getting what they deserve. And you'd be right about that, wouldn't you? But there's a difference you can't see. One has been moved by the man dying next to him. He has heard his prayer for his tormentors' forgiveness. He has seen his concern for others. He knows from what he's heard that he has the power to save himself – and yet for some unseen reason, he's not using it. And in that moment, despite what he sees – a broken, bleeding, wretch of a man – he is given an insight into the boundless heart and infinite love of God for his lost creatures; a love so incomprehensibly vast that he would give his only Son as a sacrifice to redeem our lives from hell. This righteous man, he said to himself, is the real King – the One with an eternal kingdom. And he asked to be part of it. "Despite what I see, I believe. Write my name in your book so that you remember me when you come into your kingdom."

That, my friends is faith. It's the faith we confess. And it's the faith that we need to keep building ourselves up in despite what we see going on in the world around us. And so we must continue to meet together, keep hearing the Word and promises of God, keep receiving Christ's body and blood given for us, keep encouraging one another – and continue doing all those other things that keep the church running and functioning for the preservation of our faith from now until the day Christ our Lord returns – or, until the day comes individually for you when you close our eyes in death. If that happens first, then Jesus' promise to a dying thief are the same words he says to each one of us who remains faithful: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." It will happen when you open your eyes again you will see the difference your faith made. May our gracious God grant it to each one of us for Jesus sake. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!