

“On Pulling Down and Lifting Up”

Psalm 75

First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest

July 5, 2020

I hope that each and all of you had a safe and happy Fourth of July as we celebrate our nation's 244th birthday this weekend with family and friends and at least some virtual fireworks, if you were watching your televisions last night. For my part, I miss watching the display down at Grant Park, where from the vantage-point of a rented sailboat moored in Monroe Harbor, we would watch as up to a million people would pack the Lakefront, their oohs and aahs rising in concert with the light. It may be awhile before we can do that again. But my all-time favorite fireworks display took place in Media, Pennsylvania when I was a small boy in the Sixties. Thousands of people had gathered on blankets and folding chairs on a hillside as night was falling, filled with anticipation. Unnoticed, I wandered off from my family (children actually did that back then) to get closer to the action. When the fireworks started, I stood transfixed, unaware of anything else, but when they were over, I couldn't find my parents as the crowds surged back toward their cars. Running about here and there anxiously, I came across a fire truck and asked the man standing beside it if he had seen my parents. He smiled, invited me to climb up onto the truck, and grabbed a shining microphone. A huge voice went thundering into the night saying, "A boy named Clinton Roberts is looking for his parents, who are lost. He is waiting for them at the fire engine on top of the hill." My parents promptly appeared out of the darkness, looking sheepish and relieved. It was the best Fourth of July ever!

I

With most fireworks displays being cancelled, this Fourth of July feels a lot different. The economy is uncertain. Covid-19 infections are on the rise. And, since the death of George Floyd six weeks ago, many of our fellow Americans have taken to the streets in protest, bringing their fireworks with them. People are calling for justice, for accountability, for an end to systemic racism, and some are even pulling down statues of White Confederate soldiers as symbols of slavery. Back when I attended college at UNC Chapel Hill, there was a statue of a soldier on campus named "Silent Sam." He was young, barefoot, dressed in ragged butternut, wearing a shapeless hat and clutching a crude musket, facing north. I ate many a bag lunch leaning against the pedestal of Silent Sam. He didn't look much like a slaveholder to me, which accurately describes the great majority of people who fought and died in "The War of Northern Aggression," as the Civil War is still characterized by some living south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Silent Sam got pulled down one night by a group of UNC students as police stood by, watching. Since then, many more statues have toppled as well. They've been characterized as symbols of white supremacy, which perhaps they are, particularly in light of when they were erected, largely during a time when "Jim Crow" legislation was being passed in statehouses across the South nearly half a century after the Civil War had ended. But passing judgment on the past can be problematic. Was Robert E. Lee a hero or a villain? What about Thomas Jefferson? Or George Washington, the "Father of

our Country” himself? They were people of their own time and generation, as are we. None of them were without their faults, as none of us are. Perhaps what is really needed is for our nation to come to terms with the full truth of our past, in order to embrace a fresh vision for our future of what it really could mean to be “one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.” To do that, we will need to pull down more than statues. We’re going to need to pull down our pride, our bigotry, our self-righteousness about who’s right and who’s wrong, about “who’s got it coming to them,” and who should be condemned. Let’s pull down that, because if we don’t, they’re sure not going to be making any statues glorifying us.

II

Which brings us to our text for this Sunday: Psalm 75.

Psalm 75 is a national psalm of thanksgiving for God’s judgment, a psalm attributed to Asaph, who in 1 Chronicles 25 we learn was a musician appointed by King David to “prophesy with lyres, harps and cymbals.” That’s what the Psalms were meant to be used for: a means for the nation to worship God through music, song and prayer...through these ancient words of beauty and truth. No wonder that 3000 years later we’re still using them for worship, and Psalm 75 carries a particular message for us about the justice of God, a message repeated by Jesus himself.

The Psalmist begins with gratitude: “We give thanks to you, Yahweh; we give thanks; your name is near.” And then God himself speaks, saying, “At the set time that I appoint, I will judge with equity.” In Psalm 73, we find Asaph lamenting about the prosperity of the wicked, almost despairing of God’s judgment on earth. “How long, O Lord?” is a common refrain in the Psalms and the Prophets. God’s people hunger and thirst for righteousness, as Jesus understood. How long will we have to wait for it? What about the unrighteous? The arrogant? The wicked? How long will they “get away with it?” That was Asaph’s problem. And it’s our problem, too.

We want justice. We want the wicked punished. And we want it now. We may even be having doubts, Like Asaph, that God will ever bring forth justice on earth. But in Psalm 75, we are hearing from a different person altogether. Asaph has changed. He has had a conversation with God about justice, and he relates to the nation what God has said.

“When the earth is toppling, with all its inhabitants, it is I who keep the pillars steady,” Says God. The pillars of creation, and the pillars of society, too: pillars of justice and mercy; pillars of righteousness and peace. God says to the arrogant, “Do not boast;” and to the wicked, “Don’t toot your own horn!” For “not from the east or from the west”—not from any human agency—will judgment be rendered; but God himself will do the “pulling down and lifting up,” even as Mary herself prophesied in the Gospel of Luke: “He has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts; He has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly...filling the hungry with good things.” Isn’t that what we’re all hungry for, too?

Judgment belongs to God and not to us. God will judge the nations. In his time and in his way. The wheat and the tares grow up together, until the harvest comes. Meanwhile, God sends the rain on the just and the unjust; on the merciful, and on the unmerciful.

III

But now the Psalmist speaks about something else: a Cup of foaming wine, well-mixed, that God holds in store for the wicked. God will pour a draught from this Cup, “and all the wicked of the earth will drain it to the dregs.”

Wow.

Isaiah speaks about this Cup, as does Jeremiah when he prophesied the destruction of Judah by the sword and the Babylonian Captivity which would follow. The Book of Revelation refers to it as well, when in Chapter 14 it speaks of those “who will also drink the wine of God’s wrath.” And in the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane praying, “Father, if you will, let this Cup pass from me; yet not my will but yours be done.” The draught we are speaking of in all these passages is God’s judgment on our sins, the Cup of God’s wrath that Jesus drank to the dregs on Good Friday for our sake, saying “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they’re doing.”

On this particular Sunday, the poetry of Julia Ward Howe comes to mind: *“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on.”*

In a time in our own country’s history when truth itself has become politicized, can we still believe with the Psalmist that judgment belongs to God? Will we wait for it with patience? Will we rejoice that God alone is Lord of the conscience—our Judge and Redeemer combined? St. Augustine, in his sermon on this Psalm says God sees two kinds of people: one is humble, confessing their sin; and the other is proud, confessing nothing. Which one will God lift up? Which one are we?

Friends, our willingness to let God be God can free us all to pursue justice, starting with ourselves. Because judgment and justice are two different things. God’s judgment is the consequence of sin, something Abraham Lincoln felt keenly back in 1865 when in his Second Inaugural Address he reflected on the enormous price in bloodshed the entire nation, North and South, had suffered on account of the institution of slavery. His conclusion about that, printed shortly before his own death, was that “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.” But then he went on to say, “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nations wounds...to cherish a just and lasting peace...” Judgment is found in the consequences of sin because in all truth, sin is its own punishment. Justice works differently. It’s not about punishment. It’s about our restoration to a right relationship with God, our neighbor, and ourselves. It’s the kind of justice that Jesus came to bring forth on earth. As Julia Ward Howe put it: *“In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me. As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free; while God is marching on.”*

Friends, on this 244th anniversary of the birth of our nation, let us rejoice and give thanks that God is near us still; that judgment belongs to God; and when we seek to do what is right, with kindness and with humility, God will lead us in truth, and bring forth our reconciliation in Christ, in whom is found a freedom and justice not for some—but for all.

Let's lift up that this Fourth of July.

Amen.