

“WE HAVE HAD MORE THAN ENOUGH OF CONTEMPT”

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 2017

Text: Psalm 123:3

The opposite of love is not hatred. The opposite of love is not apathy. The opposite of love is . . . contempt. Just as love is the fulfillment of the law of God, so all sin is founded on contempt: contempt for God, contempt for others, contempt for oneself.

Definition: “Contempt” is a way of looking at people which includes a negative decision about their worth. To contemn (with a “t” not a “d”) is to scorn. Despise. Look down on. Etymologically, it comes from a Latin word meaning “to slight.” That is, to undervalue, or underappreciate.

The reason I say all sin is based on contempt is this: Every relationship begins by noticing that a person exists, that he or she is present or near (hence “neighbor”). Such awareness usually happens by seeing. How we see the person, what we decide about that person’s value, shapes our interactions with the person. If we think “That person is of less value than I,” we have an excuse to act unjustly and hurt them. On the other hand, if we think “That person is worth more than I am,” we sin by holding ourselves in contempt. In the eyes of God (*coram deo*), all are equally precious. And God’s court is the only jurisdiction in which every verdict is true. Any violation of God’s truth about our equal value is a slighting of someone, which is contempt.

The commandment which makes contempt a sin is familiar to you, although it does not use the word. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Not more than, not less than, but “as yourself.”

The Song of Mary is about the evil of contempt in the world and about how God heals a contempt-ridden world with his mercy. Mary considers herself of low degree, but God shows favor to her. That is a pattern for what God wants to do for everyone in

the world. Before God’s mercy happens to us, the situation is as described in Psalm 123:3: “Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.” Then, when we’re fed up with contempt, God shows mercy, and brings peace and justice.

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord” why? For you, Lord, have looked with favor on your lowly servant. From this day all generations will look at me as “blessed.” (2x)

Some ancient manuscripts attribute this song to Mary, but others say it is from Elizabeth. Check the footnote in your Bible. But I think it’s about me, and you would do well to think it is about you. God has looked with favor upon you. You should recognize that sentiment from the third line of our benediction: “The Lord look with favor upon you, and give you peace.”

The Magnificat presents the program of Jesus, the agenda of God working through Jesus Christ, overpowering the awful sin of contempt.

What did Jesus do? What was necessary! He “scattered the proud in their conceit,” and he “lifted up the lowly.” In all this, he was remembering “the promise made to Israel, to Abraham and his children forever.”

How did Jesus “scatter the proud in their conceit”? Every parable he told, ripped the façade away from those people who thought they were really something, greater than others. My favorite is the two men who went up to the temple to pray. One of them had the nerve to thank God that he was not like the other one! Base, vile contempt! And remember the Sermon on the Mount? It’s not a

handbook for liturgists. It is a slashing critique of people who thought that their doing stuff properly (praying, fasting, alms-giving) made them better than others. When some asked Jesus about the people who were killed in a tragic incident, the fall of a tower, whether they were worse people than others (meaning themselves), Jesus gave a scathing reply. “Unless you all repent, you will all likewise perish!”

Jesus “scattered the proud in their conceit.”

And how did Jesus “lift up the lowly”? I hardly need to name particular episodes, because Jesus gravitated to everyone who was down and picked them up, each according to their need. He took the useless people, rejected people, despised people, all those who were held in contempt (including taxpayers, ugh!), and honored them with his presence and his gifts.

Jesus fulfilled the Magnificat, thereby glorifying the God who esteems everyone correctly, that is, evenly. Equally. This is the God who “would have no one perish.” Who gave his Son “for the world,” the “cosmos” of people, not just some of us.

And the saving action of God described in the Magnificat is necessary because we all seem to get off on the wrong foot. We drastically underappreciate God, and we are very confused about how to value ourselves and other people. The simple truth is we are God’s children, of equal value to our heavenly Father. But we let all sorts of other criteria determine our relationships, and that messes up how we interact.

Every person has worth! Dignity! Value! We know this, of course; we just don’t act on it the way we should. Biblically, the trouble started when Adam and Eve undervalued God, and thought they could be God’s equals. It continued in the other early stories in Genesis in which people undervalue one another. Jealousy, greed, partisanship, violence—between the sexes, between brothers and sisters,

between nations . . . all of these thrive in the soil of contempt. It’s a mess, and no one escapes.

Hence the Psalm 123 appeal to God: “Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.” Others have shown contempt for us, and we have “returned the disfavor.” Have mercy upon us.

God has had mercy upon us.

As truly as God showed mercy to Mary, God has showed mercy to you and me. And in not too different a fashion! We all pray in the Christmas carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem”: “Oh, holy child of Bethlehem, be born in us today”! As we prepare to celebrate the birth oh so long ago of an underestimated baby in a contemptible village in an insignificant colony, we are getting ready to sing and say with Mary, “Magnificat anima mea dominum meum,” “My soul—which has too long festered with contempt for God, for others, and even myself perhaps—magnifies my Lord.”

Magnificat = makes great. Magnifying the Lord symmetrically reverses the sin of Adam and Eve, of course; they made too little of their Lord by trying to make themselves equal to God. We make God great. We make great the God who, in mercy and truth, seeks to restore our value, our worth, our dignity, back to the factory setting of “infinitely precious.” We magnify the God who 1) stops the contempt others show to us, and 2) restores our high regard for all our brothers and sisters.

“Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.”

We have had more than enough. But the good news is: Jesus is coming to restore our value before God. He will take away whatever false pretenses we have about being worth more than others; and he will lift us up, with Mary and all who believe, to see ourselves as blessed.

Have we had more than enough of contempt? Now,
we have more than enough of God's favor!

Amen.

