

“There is No Pleasure In Death”

Recently there has been an outbreak of underground newspapers in Portsmouth High School. One particular article struck fire into the hearts of many adults for its defense of the Chicago Seven and its mockery of Judge Julius Hoffman.

Among the majority of adults with whom I have talked I have sensed a deep hostility towards Bobby Seal, Abbie Hoffman, and those other men who were on trial.

There was a degree of indignation aroused in the hearts of most of us for the mockery and disdain they expressed towards the United States, its legal system, and all that it represented.

Few people with whom I have talked feel that the sentence they received was too severe or unjust. Rather it was felt that there was a certain amount of injustice in the lightness of the sentence.

There is a legitimate and necessary desire for justice placed by God in every man. And when justice is withheld or ignored there is frustration and hostility. To disregard this desire for justice is to ignore the difference between right and wrong and truth and falsehood.

To paraphrase a paragraph from the Constitution of the United Presbyterian Church, no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings justice and injustice upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man does.

However, as with all of mans desires, the desire for justice has been perverted into a pleasure in judgment and vengeance.

Last summer when Senator Edward Kennedy had that tragic accident there was a degree of pleasure enjoyed by many of his political opponents. I heard many that defamed his person as well as his actions. There seemed to be a greater desire for judgment and vindication than for truth and justice.

Likewise one can hardly deny that much of the controversy surrounding the nominations to the Supreme Court has been motivated more by political judgments and vengeance than by a sincere desire for just and competent judges.

Everywhere you look there seems to be a pall of judgment hovering like an ominous shadow over the whole world.

The traditional figure of a barefooted, long-haired prophet carrying a sign pronouncing judgment upon the world is no longer funny.

But how much of all the din and hub-bub, the sound and the fury, is a sincere and realistic desire that justice be brought about and injustices corrected.

Our sense of justice has been perverted so that we desire judgment more than we do justice and the death of our enemies rather than the repentance of the criminal.

How unlike us is the God who spoke through the prophet Ezekiel saying, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live.”

I sometimes feel that Freud and Marx, as well as their modern day counterparts were complimenting themselves too much when they charged that God was created in the image of man.

It would be logical to presume that such a man-made god would enjoy the same pleasures as his human creator.

For the most part this is true of religion in general. Many people throughout the world, Christians included, worship a god who takes pleasure in the death of whoever their own enemies might be. Most religions have created a god that has put a stamp of approval upon all their own pleasures and hates.

Ezekiel and his nation lived at a time when there was good reason to take pleasure in the death of the wicked.

The Babylonians has just plundered their land, destroyed their Holy City, Jerusalem, and dragged off into captivity the wealthy and foremost citizens of Israel.

The wicked were the Israelites who had comfortably adopted the ways of the Babylonians and had forsaken the religion and customs of their native land. The wicked were disloyal Babylonian sympathizers.

You can imagine the indignation with which the loyal Israelites had received the message of Ezekiel.

Who of us who are loyal, patriotic, and law-abiding citizens are not a little cautious and wary of anybody who says that God has no pleasure in the death of a communist sympathizer, the radical student who waves the blag flag of anarchy, or the common ordinary run of the town juvenile delinquent?

Most of us do not take pleasure in the death of any man. But I daresay that all of us, naturally and justly, would desire the death of the thief or the murderer, rather than the death of his victim. In fact, there seems to be no just alternative to the problem of crime than the way of judgment and death.

However, Ezekiel was offering an alternative, although sounding a little reckless if not downright unjust. God was graciously offering forgiveness to the Babylonian sympathizer if he would turn from his way, yet, he would allow the death of the patriotic, law-abiding Israelite who made one lousy slip-up.

“For the righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression: as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall thereby in the day that he turneth from his wickedness...”

In contemporary language that was tantamount to offering on the one hand reprieve to a criminal who, despite his long record of crime, demonstrated his desire to go straight, and on the other hand, mercilessly warning that all the past righteousness of a man cannot acquit him for the guilt of one Mai Lai massacre.

It seems unjust that god does not average out a man's life and weigh his good deeds over against his evil deeds. It seems unjust that, in the sight of god, so much depends upon where you are presently going rather than where you have recently been or come from. For this places both the law-abiding citizen and the juvenile delinquent in the same precarious situation.

To the accusation of gods injustice god responds through Ezekiel by saying, are not my ways equal? Are not my ways just?"

If we say that god's desire for repentance rather than judgment is unjust we are really saying that man should be bound forever by his past crimes, or acquitted forever for his past goodness.

If he has been law-abiding all of his life allow him a few slip-ups every once in a while. If he has had a long record of crime, let him die. He made his bed. Let him sleep in it.

But is it not unjust to capitulate to a cynical fatalism that shuts the door of hope upon those who have been caught in a web of crime?

Is it not just to desire the repentance of a criminal rather than his judgment? Is it not just to offer a man the opportunity to break from his past? God proclaims that he has left the way of repentance open to all who choose to turn.

But God's attempts to justify his desire failed in the eyes of the House of Israel. In a sense the Israelites were right for they had a deep desire that justice would be accomplished and that their disloyal and unfaithful country-men might receive their due punishment. Therefore, they could

not help but see through God's defensive argument. They sense some injustice in God's desire that the wicked not die.

Perhaps what betrayed the injustice of God's pleasure more than anything else was his passionate cry "turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel."

For behind this call for conversion emerges the face of a God who is not simply an impartial judge who hears dispassionately the case that is before him. A just judge should have no stock in the defendant or in the outcome of the trial. He is there simply to listen to the evidence and pass judgment on that basis.

The Greek god of justice was blind-folded goddess who carried a balancing scale. She could not be influenced by a person's appearance. The weight of the evidence spoke for itself. Her only role was to hold the scales disinterestedly.

But our God is not blind or disinterested. He has a large investment in the defendant. He has a passionate interest in the outcome of the trial, for it is not just anybody who is on trial. It is his chosen people Israel, who stand before him charged with these sins. It is his people that must bear the weight of judgment and punishment.

God finds himself in the precarious and tense situation. He can not disqualify himself from the trial. Yet, he is torn between his desires for justice and his desire that his children should not die.

And in a sudden cry of anguish god says "Let justice perish if it means the death of my people." God chooses to bear in himself the awful guilt and shame of his own injustice rather than to justly demand the death of his children.

For as the Apostle Peter has written it was God in Jesus Christ "who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sin, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. (1 Peter 3:24)

God's pleasure in the life of the wicked is an unjust pleasure. Yet, it is God's injustice that turns out to be our pleasure, our hope, and our salvation.

The injustice of God's pleasure opens the door of hope to all men with the sudden realization that it is not God who destroys the wicked or the righteous—it is our own wrong doing that brings judgment upon ourselves.

Although no man has ever earned the right to live; although everyman, good or bad, receives life freely from the hand of God, God is powerless to keep a man from committing suicide. He has elected to give a person the freedom to die in exchange for the freedom to repent.

When God spoke through Ezekiel saying I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked he was also saying that there was no purpose in their death, for the word "pleasure" also means "purpose."

God has no purpose in the death of the wicked. Death was not and is not in God's purpose for man.

God's purpose fails, his desire is unrealized, and his pleasure is destroyed when ever a man is traveling deathward. Whenever a man's past destroys him, it is a silent reminder of the failure of Gods pleasure and purpose.

Though God does everything within his power to bare the demands of justice and offer life to men there are some things that God is powerless to do without the help of man.

As Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, "will man say that when God wants bridges and tunnels, wants the lightening harnessed and cathedrals built, he will do the work himself? That is an absurd and idle fatalism. God stores the hills with marble, but he never built a Parthenon; he fills the mountains with ore, but he never made a needle or a locomotive."

Likewise, God offers the opportunity to all men to turn from their past, however, he has limited himself to working through men such as Ezekiel.

For he says, “Son of man, I have set thee as a watchmen unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth and warn them from me...; if thou does not speak to wan the wicked man from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.”

We live in a world that cares little that the wicked man dies in his iniquity. To a large degree we are fascinated by his judgment and death. 75% of all our tax money is spent looking for better ways to kill him. Even a superficial observation of our reading and viewing habits betray a pleasure in his violence and death.

We cannot as God’s people afford to succumb to the forces of death at work in the world or, for the sake of expedience, use their weapons. We are to be partisans on the side of life.

God desire the repentance of the criminal rather than his slow death. But the conversion of the criminal depends to a large extent, upon the prior repentance of the law-abiding citizens. For sin is not only doing what is wrong, It is failing to do what is right.

There has been a solemn responsibility laid upon us as modern day Ezekiel’s to provide an alternative to the inevitable slow death of the criminal that will satisfy the demands of justice while leaving open the opportunity for repentance.

There is a solemn warning that we are responsible for the death of any criminal who has not been given the opportunity and encouragement to turn from his past.

As God’s people we are to be modern day Ezekiel’s who have a deep desire that justice be obtained without judgment and vengeance.

WE are to be God's watchmen pointing out to all men that God's injustice in not desiring the death of the wicked turns out to be their pleasure and hope for a new life.

I am not so idealistic as to think that such an attitude towards life and justice will do away with crime or perhaps be any more successful than our present attitudes.

At any rate, worldly success is not that final judge of the correctness of a course of action. Rather it is God himself who is the final judge that assures us that despite all failures he has no pleasure in the death of any man.