

Christological Subversion: A Sermon

7th Sunday of Easter, 2007

Ps. 68

Acts 16: 16-34

Rev. 22:12-14,16-17,20

John 17:20-26

This morning's gospel reading is one of a series of readings from Jesus' farewell discourse in John's gospel we have had the last few Sundays that will conclude with the reading for Trinity Sunday. This morning's reading is actually the conclusion of the discourse in John's gospel, and has been referred to since the sixteenth century as Christ's "High Priestly Prayer." Unfortunately, as the lectionary editors sometimes do, they have rather arbitrarily cut the reading in a way that misses the main point of the chapter, so I'm going to preach as if the reading included the entire chapter. So much the worse for the lectionary editors.

In this chapter, John summarizes three central themes in his gospel, themes that run like a red thread from beginning to end. At the same time, John introduces an interpretive principle when he expounds these themes that I call Christological subversion. This interpretive principle is not unique to John. It appears in numerous places in the New Testament, but John uses it throughout his gospel, and we will largely misunderstand the New Testament if we don't understand the principle.

What do I mean by Christological subversion? Christological subversion is a special use of irony or paradox that we find in many New Testament passages. Irony and paradox are literary devices that use words in ways that seem to mean the opposite

of their original meaning or seem self-contradictory but actually, when we think about them, have a deeper meaning. Luther was, of course, very fond of this kind of paradox: The power of God is hidden in the weakness of the cross; The believing Christian is simultaneously just and sinner. The reason I use the term Christological subversion is that throughout the New Testament and, especially here in John's gospel, the person or actions of Jesus take our normal conceptions of what should be the case and turn them upside down. So, Jesus, the crucified peasant from Nazareth, is the King of the Jews. Jesus is the divine judge who pardons the guilty. Through his resurrection, the death of Jesus brings life.

So then, in the passage we read from John's gospel this morning, the apostle summarizes three central themes of his gospel, three examples of Christological subversion. First, glory is not glorious. Second, we don't love because we want to be loved. We love because we are already loved. Third, unity does not mean being part of the club. These three themes are in direct contradiction to the common sense way in which most people live their lives, both in John's time and still today.

So, first, glory is not glorious.

"Glory" is one of those Bible words we do not use much in ordinary conversation these days. It is one of those larger than life words we associate with hymns and songs: "Glory, glory, hallelujah!" "Glory to God in the highest!" There was even a popular song years ago that rang the changes on "Gloria! Gloria!" Don't worry. I'm not going to sing it.

But even if we do not use the word much, we still know what it means. In popular culture, entertainers and athletes are the ones who seem most often to be the recipients of what used to be called "glory." For at least two generations, it seems that becoming a movie star, a rock and roll star or a basketball

player has been the highest goal that many young people hope to attain. That's what we mean by glory. It seems to be a misuse of the word "glory" to ascribe it to singers like Britney Spears or rap stars, but that's where our culture is today. Of course, at places like Yale, or Harvard, where I worked for several years, glory has another meaning. Glory means tenure. Occasionally, we get glimpses of what the word used to mean. For a few weeks at least, many in our culture saw the old idea of glory in the firefighters who risked and even lost their lives in the World Trade Center bombings.

But glory has another meaning. Glory is not only what is worthy of praise and admiration, but that which is overwhelmingly beautiful or bright. We still respond to a beautiful mountain scene or a great symphony with words like: "That's glorious!" We talk of a beautiful sunset or the sun rising in "all its glory."

The Bible talks about God in both ways. In the Old Testament, glory is ascribed to God, first, because of his mighty deeds. So God tells Moses that he will win the victory over Pharaoh by delivering Israel from slavery. "I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord." (Exodus 14:4, ESV) In the passage in Exodus that celebrates Israel's deliverance from the pursuing Egyptians at the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses and the people of Israel sing: "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea." (15:1) The Psalm this morning does not use the word "glory," but the Psalmist nonetheless celebrates God's glory by praising him for his mighty deeds.

But glory is also associated with God in the latter sense of praise and admiration and beauty, especially as we see God's power and wisdom reflected in the created world. Psalm 19 says: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." In the Old Testament, God's glory is particularly associated with images of fire and light. Exodus

tells us that when God gave the ten commandments to Moses, a thick cloud descended on the mountain, with thunder and lightning (Ex. 19:16) and that "The glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days." (24:16). During Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, the cloud would settle on the tabernacle, the tent in which the priests offered sacrifice: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." (Exodus 40:34-35)

When we turn to John's gospel, we discover that he is familiar with and uses each one of these Old Testament images of glory, but there is a key difference, and this is what I mean when I talk about Christological subversion. In the Old Testament, glory is used as a way of distinguishing the divine majesty and power from everything else in creation. It is God who rescues Israel from Egypt. They do not rescue themselves. God alone is the Creator, and his glory is seen in the created world. When the glory of God appears on Mt. Sinai, God instructs the people to stay away from the mountain. As God says in Isaiah 42:8: "I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other"

But in John's gospel, as a prism focuses and refracts light, so God's glory is refracted and focused as it were in Jesus, the Jew from Nazareth. John sees God's glory as being displayed in a way in which it had never appeared in the Old Testament, focused in a particular human being. How can this be? How can the glory that belongs to God alone be shared with one particular human being? The answer, of course, is that, for John, Jesus of Nazareth was not just a human being, but the very Word of God, the Son who was with the Father from all eternity, and became a human being like us to live among us. John writes: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the

Father, full of grace and truth.” (Jn 1:14)

As the Old Testament spoke of God’s glory being shown in his mighty deeds, so Jesus’ miracles also show the divine glory. Of the miracle in Cana, when Jesus turned water into wine, John says: “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory.” The Old Testament says that God’s glory is shown in creation, and John tells us “He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” As the Old Testament associates God’s glory with light, so John associates Jesus with light. “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:2 5) As the Old Testament indicates that God’s glory dwelt in the temple, so John deliberately uses the same imagery to say that God’s glory dwells in Jesus. When John writes that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory,” the Greek word for “dwelt” means literally to live in a tent or tabernacle. As God’s glory was present in the Old Testament tabernacle, so now God’s glory dwells in the flesh of Jesus. For John, the Word made flesh in Jesus is Israel’s new Temple.

But John’s understanding of glory is subversive in another way. For all of human history, human beings have sought glory and fame in order to draw attention to themselves, to be known by other people. And, so, if John is going to associate the divine glory with Jesus, we might expect this Jesus to be someone who would draw attention to himself, who would seek and achieve fame and power and wealth. That’s what glory means today, and it is what glory meant in the ancient world. But for John, those who seek such glory are those who do not attain it. John speaks of those of Jesus’ time who were reluctant to follow him because of fear of public disapproval—for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” (John 12:43)

In contrast, the divine glory that John sees in Jesus is

focused and refracted precisely because he does not seek his own glory, but the glory of his Father. In one of several similar passages, Jesus says in John's gospel: "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me . . ." (8:54) As our gospel writer sees it, it is because Jesus did not seek his own glory that that glory was not recognized by most of those whom he met. He writes: "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." (1:10)

And this brings us to John's most shocking use of Christological subversion when he talks about divine glory and Jesus. In the first verse of Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prays: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you . . ." What does Jesus mean when he prays "Glorify your Son," or as he says in John 13:31: "Now is the Son of Man glorified"?

The answer is provided by the context. At the beginning of the Last Supper discourse in John, Judas left the party gathered for the meal in the upper room, and went out to betray Jesus, who will then be turned over to his enemies, beaten and crucified. The material that follows is the culmination of John's gospel, and makes clear what John finally means by glory. When Jesus prays, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you . . ." (17:1), the "hour" is a term used throughout John's gospel to refer to the time of Jesus' crucifixion and death. So the culmination of John's understanding of glory is that glory is found not in fame, not in greatness or recognition or what the world thinks of as success, but in the Word who became flesh, who came to his own but was not recognized, who sought his Father's glory, not his own, and who finally, was crucified.

And this, of course, is not what ancient people meant by glory, nor, if we are honest, is it what we would usually mean today. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre points out that there

are two Christian virtues discussed by Thomas Aquinas that do not appear in Aristotle, patience and humility. Aristotle thought humility was a vice, and he does not mention patience at all. We know where Aquinas got the idea that humility and patience were virtues. We have to thank the New Testament's Christological subversion for that. So we can summarize John's first point by saying that glory is not glorious.

We now turn to John's second point of Christological subversion. We do not love in order to be loved. We love because we are loved. Figuring out what this might mean leads us back once more to look at what John's gospel says about glory. Throughout John's gospel, the notions of glory and the notions of love are treated in parallel ways. They belong together.

So as the Son shares in the Father's glory from all eternity, so the Father eternally loves the Son. In the conclusion of the High Priestly Prayer from this morning's Gospel Reading, Jesus brings the divine love and glory together: "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." As Jesus' works are the prism and focus of the Father's glory, so they also are prisms of his love. "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel." (5:20) As Jesus seeks the Father's glory rather than his own, this leads to a mutual glory. As the Father's glory is reflected in Jesus, so there is also a mutual love between Father and Son. "The Father loves the Son," Jesus says, "and has given all things into his hand." (3:35) And as the Son gives glory to the Father, he also loves the Father: "[B]ut I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father." (14:31) Finally, as Jesus is glorified in his suffering and death, so the love between Father and Son is also shown in the cross: "For this reason the Father loves me,

because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.”
(10:17)

And this is the clue that helps us unwrap the meaning of John’s use of Christological subversion when he uses the themes of glory and love. John’s subversive point is that glory and love belong together. A helpful illustration is provided in Philip Melanchthon’s discussion of love in “The Apology for the Augsburg Confession.” Melanchthon insists that we cannot love God if we do not first see God as a lovable object. The human heart cannot love a God whom it perceives as angry and threatening or giving commands of the law. God can only be loved if we first see that God is merciful, that God loves us, and is for us. Only then can we experience the gratitude that enables us to respond to God’s love with love of our own.

So by bringing glory and love together, John paints us a portrait of a God who is a lovable object because he is a God who is “for us,” a God who is on our side. A God who was merely a God of glory, a God of power might be a God whom we might fear, but not a God whom we could trust or love. By bringing glory and love together, and focusing both in the cross of Jesus, John invites us to love God because we realize that we have first been loved. As Jesus says in John’s gospel, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (12:32)

This brings us to John’s final point of Christological subversion: Unity does not mean belonging to the club.

One of the questions we are having to face as Christians today is: What is the center of the Church’s unity? Jesus prays in this morning’s gospel reading for those who will believe through the apostle’s word, and he prays “that they all may be one.” Part of the disagreement in our church today has to do with what it means for the Church to be “one.” The Windsor Report spoke of those who were choosing to “walk apart” from

the Anglican Communion. When our House of Bishops met recently, they rejected the requests of the Anglican Primates who recently gathered in Tanzania because, said the bishops, these requests are incompatible with our polity. The American bishops appealed to the Episcopal Church's autonomy as a national church. Although I do not have time to go into details, I think it is clear that the notion of church unity expressed by our bishops is that the church is an institution, a club. What the American bishops said to the Primates was, in effect, "Your club cannot tell our club what to do."

John's message of christological subversion, as expressed in our gospel reading this morning is that the church's unity is not that of a club. In the verses that precede this morning's reading, Jesus prays: "I am not praying for the world but for those whom you are giving me, for they are yours," and a few verses later, "They are not of the world just as I am not of the world." Now the unity that the world offers is precisely that of an institution, of belonging to the club. And, unfortunately there's always the danger that the world's notion of unity will invade the church, as it has done many times in the past. The unity that Jesus gives instead is what might be called an organic unity. As the life of the Father and Son is a mutual sharing of glory and love for all eternity, so the Church receives its unity by sharing in that glory and love. And as the glory and love shared between Father and Son is mutual, so any unity possessed by the Church has to be a mutual unity of the kind of glory and love that is willing to undergo crucifixion. The Church's unity can never be an appeal to local autonomy.

So John puts in place the last piece in his puzzle of Christological subversion. As the Son is the focal point of God's glory, and that glory is revealed in the cross, and as the Father and the Son share a mutual love from all eternity, so when we see the glory of God that is revealed in the love of the cross, we respond in gratitude, and we are invited to

become partners in the mutual glory and love that is shared between the Father and the Son. So Jesus says in John 15:9-10, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." And in Jesus' prayer in this morning's gospel, he ties the themes of glory and love together once again: "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (17:22-23)

We do not attain glory, then, by striving for the attention or praise of others, but by receiving the glory that God the Father gives us freely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus his Son. Both glory and love attract, at least when they belong together. When they belong together, we see that God is not against us, but for us. God's glory is demonstrated in his saving actions, which he performs because he loves us. It is God's love in Jesus Christ that chiefly demonstrates God's glory. As the beauty of God's glory in creation beckons us and calls us without forcing us, so the weakness of a God who has taken on our burdens and our failures and our sinfulness in Jesus Christ relieves us of the burden of having to bear those things for ourselves. We do not love because we want to be loved, but because God has loved us first in Jesus Christ. We are not united because we belong to our club and need to protect our turf from interference by another club, but because we have been allowed to share in the eternal glory and love of the Father and Son who loved us first, and loved us well. As Jesus prays: "I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

And that really is subversive.