

Sermon: Year B, Proper 6
Texts: Ezekiel 17:22-24
II Corinthians 5:6-17
Mark 4:26-34

In 1943, the Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz, who much later would be awarded the Nobel prize, was living on the outskirts of the Warsaw ghetto, that very small section of the city where German troops had forcibly sequestered the city's very large Jewish population. It didn't take long for the people there to realize that the Nazi plan was for their eventual extermination, and thus they determined that they would not die without a fight. Thousands of residents took up arms and initiated the Warsaw Uprising. It was soon crushed by an overwhelmingly brutal German invasion. Soldiers methodically moved from block to block, killing nearly everyone and destroying all the buildings. Milosz, who witnessed this, did not choose to fight. Instead, he wrote... mostly poems.

Several decades later, he felt compelled to try to justify his actions. He was not a pacifist, and he clearly understood the desperate acts of many of his friends. They were facing horrendous evil, and there seemed to be no option for them at all. They were forced into violence just as they had been forced into the ghetto, and there was nothing left to life except the exercise of power. This had become their fate. Any broader justice had disappeared. The residents of the ghetto had no effective advocates. At least, by the measure of the most dreadful human calculus, they could demand an eye for an eye and meet death with death. This was their judgment in protest against the judgment imposed on them, and, at least, many who might hear of their bravery, perhaps even for generations, would agree that their rebellion was utterly courageous.

But Milosz quietly contended that his writing was a serious form of rebellion too, especially his poems. He frankly admitted that they didn't stop the destruction or have any political effect. Nor did they provide the short but visceral satisfaction of being able to hate those who hate you as a last and final act. His poems, in this sense, had no power, especially when power seemed to be everything. They were just poems: words on a page, thoughts that had no target.

But this was precisely why they were important, because they were a profoundly alternative expression: they were a persuasion... without power. They weren't really a protest. They weren't confrontational. They were, instead, an invitation, an opening back into a world that had been pushed into an even smaller ghetto. Even as he watched one of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century unfold, Milosz dared to write, not with fighting in mind, but of beauty and grace and the abiding and undefeatable love that creation itself discloses in its resilient material form. He bore witness. And it wasn't the violence that needed his words. That was already too evident. He labored, rather, to preserve a vision of the world that is deeper and more true, a world that still offers options other than judging by killing, where the sheer gift of being and breathing might dissuade us from our need to destroy. His poems had no brute force. They could close no one in. They eliminated no one. But they did something even more radical. They spoke of fullness and wonder and, most stunning of all, of the possibility of human kindness, verbally held out. Persuasion.

The world came into being when God spoke it. And, in similar form, Milosz contended that his words offered creation too, just as everything seemed to be collapsing. His was a different kind of up-rising.

I was reminded of Milosz' experiences when I read Paul's words to the church in Corinth, which we have heard this morning. For even in so short a passage, there seems to be a profound contradiction: opposites held in tension. On one hand, Paul seems very clear that ultimately God will make sure that we get what we deserve. Our recompense is in God's hands, and it is inescapable because God holds all the power of eternity. And yet, within the space of only a couple of verses, Paul himself seems to suggest that God's judgment is nothing at all like our own. For it comes completely in the form of mercy, again with all of God's eternity behind it too. What are we to conclude then?

Recompense is a fearsome term. It's what we all want emphatically against others. Justice is such a pristine concept when the judgment is ours to make. But when the tables are turned and others are able to judge us, we'd prefer some distance from justice's decrees. Our comfort is determined largely by the measure of our own power. And this power is maximized when we claim, all the more, that it is we who have God's favor on our own side.

This has been the constant seduction of the church, and Paul was honest enough to name it. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth: what's fair is fair. It's hard to imagine a principle that is more deeply entrenched in us. The world demands this, and God, then, must be the power that finally secures it. Good must prevail and evil must be punished. And if we are the ones who hold the keys to this kingdom, if the truth is ours, then it is we who triumph and others must either conform or perish. And wielding this conviction like a sword, in the name of God much destruction has been wrought... But then, that's others merely getting their due.

Paul wisely recognized that we can't simply dispense with this conviction. It isn't wrong. In a most awkward way, it's absolutely right. God has the freedom to act in fury and with terrible, infinite power, to fight those who have fought him and demand what's fair. The open question, however, is whether this has been, in fact, the witness of God to us, or whether God has chosen a distinctly different path.

And here, Paul suddenly shifts his emphasis. It isn't the power of God that fascinates him. It's God's love, which, as he states, directly, is a persuasion. Paul uses exactly this term. And with it, the entire nature of justice is overturned. After duly recognizing the force that so intensely drives us forward, Paul declares that God has determined to overwhelm it, not by strength but by the beauty of infinite gift. This, he says, is God's word, God's favor, God's eternal poetry.

For Paul, Jesus Christ is everything, and the work of discipleship is allowing this word to continually transform even our most rooted convictions. Listen again to the dimensions of Paul's claims. In Christ everything old has passed away. We are a new creation. The former rules don't hold in the same way. Justice isn't determined by force; it's no longer a word of punishment but one of creation – creation that can spring even from the most desolate of ghettos. Paul's rhetoric here is not hyperbole. It's meant to be taken literally and lived literally: “from now on we regard

no one from a human point of view, because we are convinced that one [has] died [one death] for all.” And therefore death is done, and poetry, in its place, has won.

So let’s read Paul with resolve. Our world today doesn’t need our judgments made against it, which, sadly, is what many think the Church does entirely too gleefully and boastfully. The troubles of our own age and their resulting violence are plainly evident. And power still dominates. So more than all else, what the Church is called to do, still, is bear witness to this single belief: “Christ is our persuasion.”*

There’s a remarkable freedom in this: no threat, no blame, no ghetto, no hatred or exclusion, no ugly coercion. This trust simply lifts us as gifts do, undeserved and unbound from the constraints and demands of fairness. Persuasion has no targets, no victims. Rather, it’s like a mustard seed, a seemingly small gesture that mysteriously (“we know not how”) leads to branches where nests can be built and people can find a home. It’s the best summary of faith I know. Let it play in your mind today. Christ is our persuasion.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen

* This statement is a quote from David Bentley Hart, taken from his remarkable book, [The Beauty of the Infinite](#).