

Our Merciful Judge

As we continue our journey through the gospel of Matthew, we can't seem to shake this theme of judgement. Not only does it persist in clinging to us, hounding us through the pages of Matthew's gospel, in today's reading that Alma Jean read for us, the theme of judgement only seems to intensify. "This is the Good News of Jesus Christ," are the words that Alma Jean dutifully read, but it seems like anything *but* good news to us; it seems like bad news to our ears.

The truth is, we are a judgement-averse people. We don't like to hear about it, and we dread to think about it. It makes us uneasy, uncomfortable. It sets our teeth on edge. Some of you have shared with me why that is, for you personally. Sometimes talk of judgement in the church reminds us of the past, what we consider the 'bad old days' of moralistic preaching, accompanied by the threat of consequences for improper behaviour.

Talk of judgement in the church sometimes makes us feel like scolded children; it triggers our feelings of shame, of not being good enough, of not measuring up. Some of you have been wounded by forms of religion that told you you were somehow intrinsically wrong or bad in some way. Those are wounds that cry out for healing; those are examples of how religion can be mis-used.

But there is another element that I want to talk about here, that is part of our rejection of judgement. This is our sense that we are spiritual grownups, no longer children who can be talked down to. The idea of judgement offends us, because we think we have outgrown it, that we have transcended the need for talk of religious rules of right and wrong. As spiritually and intellectually enlightened people, we can make up our own minds, thank you very much, and we don't need anyone or anything telling us what we ought to do.

This is part of the time in which many of us came of age, this time of the dawning awareness of our human capacities. It's just hard for us to hear about any limits.

In our branch of the church this is even something we have projected on to the Judeo-Christian tradition, onto our understanding of Scripture, and even onto God. We've convinced ourselves of this dividing line between the Old Testament and the New; between the angry, old, father-God of the Old Testament, and the loving, compassionate, brotherly Jesus of the New Testament.

We've convinced ourselves that, back in the deep dark past, when human beings were more primitive and tribal, it was more fitting to conceive of God as an

angry, judgmental, old-man-in-the-sky kind of God. But then, as we progressed and developed, we outgrew that image of God and were able to conceive of God in more enlightened terms: a God who is all love and mercy; who no longer judges us from above, but who instead comes alongside of us to offer affirmation and encouragement.

Now, this is a very attractive narrative; the problem is, it's not true. It's not true to our Judeo-Christian tradition, it's not true to Scripture, it's not true to the God who reveals himself to us.

This way of understanding our identity as Christians—this dividing of the Old Testament from the New, this narrative of spiritual progress, is not true.

The evidence for that is right before us, in both of the readings for today: in the Old Testament passage from Ezekiel, and in the gospel reading. In Ezekiel, God says I will go out into the highways and byways and collect up all my scattered sheep. I'll extract them from amongst the messes they have found themselves in, and gather them together, and feed and care for them. God shows a special concern for the lost, the injured, and the weak; while the fat and the strong will be fed with justice. If that sounds ominous, I'm afraid it's because it's meant to.

And then, in the well-known gospel passage, the enthroned Son of Man separates the sheep and the goats, based on the criteria of whether or not they have acted justly, extending care and compassion to those who hunger and thirst, to the stranger, the poor, those who are sick or in prison, the friendless. The lowly ones who are given the exalted title

of "the least of these *who are members of my family.*" Members of the king's family.

The sheep are blessed and rewarded, while the goats are accursed and sent into eternal punishment.

So both texts that sound strong notes of judgement, of separating out the good from the bad. Despite what we may have thought, there is a remarkable consistency between the God we meet in the pages of the Old Testament and the God we meet in the person of Jesus. The so-called Old Testament God turns out to be pastoral, kind, a mothering God tending to her precious little ones. And gentle Jesus turns out to be a righteous judge, spurning those who have turned their backs, and closed their doors, to the weak and vulnerable.

Notice that in both cases the judgement is based on the criteria of God's mercy and justice. God's judgment is always in service of God's mercy and God's justice—God's work of setting the world right, of mending what is broken, healing what is hurt, righting all that has gone wrong. Setting the world right involves naming—and judging—all that is wrong. These two things are held together in our tradition: because God is a loving God, God is also a judging God.

I've been reading a book by Fleming Rutledge, who is a teacher and preacher in the Episcopal Church. Her book is called *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*. It is an outstanding book. She wrote the book in response to the very challenge I have been talking about: our aversion in the Liberal Protestant church to the idea of God's judgment. Central to her book is

this idea that God's love and God's judgement are two sides of the same coin.

We may want a God who is all-loving, and all-affirming, but aren't there things in the world that we would not *want* to affirm, Rutledge asks. Aren't there some things that ought to be judged, and finally condemned? Things like those that are named in our texts for today: abuse and exploitation of the poor; neglect of the needs of the hungry; ignoring the plight of refugees, the sick, those in prison. And of course all of these things I've just named are not just in the pages of Scripture; they're in the pages of our newspaper, too.

These harms, these injustices, these atrocities, call for more than a God who is affirming; they call for a God who is just.

While we might want to separate the two, dividing a judgmental Old Testament God from gentle Jesus, meek and mild, our tradition holds the two together—mercy and judgement—in a kind of paradox. The hymn we sang a few minutes ago is full of those paradoxes: You, Lord, are both lamb and shepherd; you, Lord, are both prince and slave. The same Jesus who is "clothed in light upon the mountain" is "stripped of might upon the cross." This is the God we worship.

Another reason why we may struggle with the idea of God's judgement is because we are afraid at what it might mean for us. We hear the threat in the words from Ezekiel: the fat and the strong will be fed with justice.

Don't take this the wrong way, but many of us can see ourselves in the description, "the fat and the strong." This

is a biblical metaphor for those who are well-off, or privileged. It's the people who are *not* in the categories that Jesus names: those who are *not* hungry or thirsty; those who are *not* refugees; those who are *not* naked or sick or in prison. In other words, most of us, most of the time.

We—the fat and the strong—worry about the risk of being judged. And so we should, if we are not aligning our lives with God's call to justice. But the fact that we are here, the fact that we are sitting in this place and listening, allowing ourselves to be judged by the Word of God in Scripture, suggests that we are least willing, willing to have our lives shaped by God, our merciful judge. We're here to listen for God's call.

We mustn't let our fear of judgement get in the way of hearing what God would say to us. We must trust that God is first of all merciful. That the God who gathers the lost and scattered sheep is also the shepherd who seeks *us* out in our lost-ness and confusion. That the king who is the friend of the poor and the hungry also welcomes *us* when we come begging for mercy, forgiveness, or understanding. That the one who tends like a mother to the wounds of the sick and suffering joins *us* in our dark valleys, bringing peace and comfort.

If we are really honest, we'll acknowledge that every one of us, even the fat and the strong, have moments when we are poor beggars in desperate need, of one kind or another.

It's at times like that that we can give thanks for the paradox at the heart of our tradition, that our God is a merciful judge; that the one who preaches a way

that is narrow has a love that reaches wide; the one who is all powerful walks each day beside us. Then perhaps we can finally say, This is the Good News of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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