

Trinity 14A 13/09/2020 Matthew 18:21-35

Every priest sees the damage that is done to people by too heavy an emphasis on God's judgment. The damage often begins in childhood. Because children can be unruly, adults too often try to frighten them into obedience. The church has been no exception to this practice. It's surprising how many hang ups we may have picked up as children in Church which affect us now. Some people in their nineties, and even eighties were sometimes introduced to the faith in this fear and trembling way. They heard judgment without grace. They adjusted their behaviour to meet the expectations of the adults, they joined the church, but weighed down by the fear, they never really learned to love God. God somehow remained someone to fear. For them love has trouble breaking through the shell of fear.

We cannot deny that the Scripture consistently proclaims God's judgment. Throughout both testaments God judges sin, confronts our injuries and exploitation of others, calls us to faithfulness, and threatens punishment for disobedience. If we look at the very earliest stories in the Bible, we see a remarkable portrayal of God. In the second of the two creation stories, the one that actually was written first, God is portrayed in a tender, attractive way (Genesis 2:4b-17). From the newly watered ground, God scoops up some mud and gently forms the first human, breathing life into his nostrils. God places the new person into a garden full of all that the human will need and delights for the senses. God cares about loneliness and so creates companions for the human, finally making another person for companionship. You cannot find a sweeter picture of God anywhere in scripture. Still, in the middle of the garden is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The fruit of that tree comes with a warning. If the human, loved and cherished by God, eats of the fruit of the tree, he will die. The threat of death hangs over this beautiful story.

When the Old Testament prophets proclaim judgment, they don't sugarcoat it like Genesis does. The prophets thunder about a God angry at the treatment of the poor, idolatry, greed, and soulless worship. If we want to choose a representative, maybe Amos is the most blistering of all. When the Lord roars, the pastures wither and the tops of mountains dry up (1:2). Amos compares God's punishment to being eaten by a lion; all that will be left over will be a few bits of flesh that the lion didn't bother with (3:12). We must admit that that is a fearsome image of God.

People will often say that the God of the Old Testament is judgmental and the God of the New Testament is loving and forgiving but when we come to the New Testament, the images of judgment do not go away. Matthew repeats the phrase throughout his gospel that sinners will be thrust into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (3:50; 22:13). We gnash our teeth when all is lost, when we feel helpless, when we have played all of our cards and still lost. Paul cautions that we are storing up wrath for ourselves on the day of wrath (Romans 2:5). We cannot oversimplify or demarcate the portrayal of God in the Old and New Testament.

Hebrews is no exception, where the writer describes God as a consuming fire. What a frightening image! We would be hard-pressed to decide which was more terrifying, the powerful jaws of a lion, or the scorching heat of a fire. This verse from Hebrews is probably an allusion to the end of Moses' life. The people are about to cross from the wilderness wandering into the promised land. Moses knows he will not be allowed to go with them. Moses warns the people not to forget their covenant, because God is a devouring fire, a jealous God (Deuteronomy 4:21-24).

We have here just a small sample: The threat of death, a snarling lion, the day of wrath, a consuming fire. We must take seriously these messages and images from scripture. While we are taking them

seriously, we must be careful with them. We can make tragic mistakes with these images from scripture. However we ignore them at our spiritual peril. If we use them wrongly, to frighten and control, we can crowd out the messages of God's love.

What we should never forget is that the messages of God's love come through the scriptures even more clearly and strongly than the messages of God's judgment. God threatens Adam and Eve with death if they eat the fruit, but they don't die. God drove them out of the garden and punished them, but God also made clothes for them. God continued to love and care for them, even after their disobedience. The prophets, for all of their thundering, teach God's love, also. Hosea could be almost as harsh as Amos, but he teaches about God's anguish over our sin. "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (Hosea 11:8b-9). In Deuteronomy, right after the scary talk of God as a consuming fire, comes this heartening promise, "Because the Lord your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you" (Deuteronomy 4:31). Matthew talks of weeping and gnashing of teeth but also of a light burden and an easy yoke (Matthew 11:30) and of a risen Christ who will be with us always (28:20).

So, throughout the Bible messages of God's love and forgiveness, mercy and care are intertwined with messages of God's judgment and punishment. We cannot separate them out, keeping only what we want. We might wish we could throw the judgment passages away and keep the love, but that would not be the best thing for our souls, for our spiritual development. The passages about judgment are there for a reason. To get at that reason, we can start with our own experience. In any attempt to master a craft or become an expert in a field, we must push ourselves. Often a coach or a teacher becomes the one who drives us to do our best. A music teacher prods a student to work on pieces the student thinks are too hard. A good coach will not let an athlete settle for a near enough, is good enough effort. A good teacher will put just the right amount of pressure on a student to get the student to think more deeply. A wise teacher or coach with just the right amount of fear inducement can motivate the student/athlete to practice just hard enough, study just a few minutes longer, strain the muscles just a bit more to bring out the best. A mean, controlling bully will not work, but too soft a mentor will leave us just short of the mark. Much the same idea works in child-rearing. That is tricky business. Being too lenient can spoil a child, being too harsh does not give the child enough room to grow. Children need a healthy combination of love and respect for their parents.

The images of God's judgment serve another purpose as well. We have to face it. God needs to get our attention. We are too indulgent with ourselves. We buy our own excuses on a regular basis. We continue to do silly things that we should know won't work. We continue on a self-destructive path, heedless of the consequences. If the images of God's judgment get our attention, then they are worth it. The confession from the 1928 Prayer Book comes to my mind: Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults. Restore thou them that are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy name. Amen.

The images of God's judgment remind us that our sin hurts people. When we exploit and/or bully other people, when we neglect the poor, when we act selfishly, God cares about the damage we do. God cares about those who are stepped on in life, who are shoved out of the way. God's judgment is rooted in God's care for those we hurt. If these images of God's wrath motivate us to treat people better, they have done their job. Now, maybe we are ready to read these words in Hebrews about God as a consuming fire. We must admit, this can seem to be a terrible image. Fire is a good thing, bringing heat, light, and protection. A consuming fire sounds different, though. Australians saw all we wanted to see of consuming fires on Black Saturday and this last January.

We have seen what fires do to people's homes and possessions. We have seen what fire has done to Afghanistan war veterans attacked with IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices). In some cases, their ears, hands, and even faces have been burned off. How can we see a loving God in such an image?

A young priest, new to the country, once saw a fire raging on a neighbour's paddock near the Vicarage. Rushing breathlessly to the fence the priest called out desperately, trying to get the neighbour's attention. The old farmer who owned the land ambled out with a smirk on his face. "Relax, son," the farmer said, "it ain't hell yet!"

The farmer had, of course, set the fire himself. He was burning the stubble from his field. It was the fastest, easiest, cheapest way to do it. Without the fire, the field would have poor growth next season. God's consuming fire does not have to leave us scarred and disfigured. God's consuming fire can burn away the stubble in our souls, preparing us for new growth. That may not seem a pleasant image, but it may be what we need to hear.

Let us take seriously the images of God's judgment in scripture. Let us learn from them. Let us always balance these images with images of God's mercy. In Hebrews, the author passionately describes Jesus as one who became human to understand us, show us the way, and to redeem us. That is a God of love. In our teaching to other people, especially to children, let us remember that such a God is what we want to model and preach. We cannot get there only on fear. A quaking fear of God is not right. We want people in church to learn to love God and we have a very good reason for doing that. For from cover to cover, the Scripture teaches that God is head over heels in love with us. Amen.

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