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Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 18, 2019

Proper 15, Year C:
Jeremiah 23:23-29
Psalm 82
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Judgment and fire

An interesting self-evaluation to do is to examine one's reaction to the words, judgment and justice, insofar as they have to do with God. I put them together because I mean judgment that is just, not arbitrary judgment or judgmentalism. But judgment nonetheless: not just justice in the abstract, but the actual real meting out of justice in the concrete.

There are two ways of thinking about it that defang the idea somewhat, that I hear quite a lot.

Some of us will experience the very idea of judgment as something we are averse to, something that impedes on our general sense of self-worth. In this thinking, the idea of judgment, even with justice, is something to be avoided. Perhaps we think of it as something that preachers thunder on about to try to coerce people to agree with them. Maybe it's even something offensive.

Or, along the same lines, we might see divine judgment, with justice, as necessarily mild. Necessarily mild, in this reading, because surely the justice part of it will mean that the judge will take into account our general demeanor and goodness. I remember hearing an interview with a former politician, who said that he wasn't too worried about judgment, because he figured God would recognize that he was a pretty good guy, and God was pretty understanding, and so forth. This is another way that justice with judgment can be defanged, made a little less problematic.

There are other contexts, however, where judgment with justice is something to be looked forward to, and not defanged at all. For example, In the spiritual ethos that arose among African-American slaves from the eighteenth-century forward, judgment with justice was something that they pleaded for. When you have someone's boot on your neck, the establishment of justice is something you look forward to because it would mean an end to your dehumanization. Everything is not okay. Some things are unjust and should be judged so, and not allowed to continue.

This isn't to say that this ethos only looks forward to the judgment with justice of others. There is, among the black church, a keen awareness of personal judgment. But the poor and the powerless experience the idea of judgment and justice in a different way than do the comfortable, quite often. You see this expressed throughout the scriptures. In the psalm today, the psalmist pleads: "Arise, O God, and rule the earth." Come on! There are too many boots on too many necks.

The first two ideas about judgment and justice, which make it less of a threat, are not, however, found in scripture, and we can tell that just by looking at today's gospel reading. Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it was already kindled. ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No ... division!" And then goes on to say how this division will divide communities, will even divide families. This is Jesus in his John-the-Baptist moments. Repent, sinner, because there is a fire coming. Not peace, but division. There is no defanging going on here. There are no disclaimers. He doesn't say, "I have come to bring fire, but don't worry so much if

you're basically a good guy. I don't mean you." No, in order to defang the judgment of Christ, one has to basically defang the gospel itself. There is fire coming.

But hold on, you might say. Hold on before you start thundering on too much. (Sometimes it's said that this is one of those scriptures that preachers preach on when they're mad at someone.) Hold on. How does this "not peace but division," "came to bring fire," gospel jibe with the God who is perfect mercy? We talk about God's mercy all the time. How does that fit in?

Or what about Jesus as the good shepherd, who looks out for his flock? What about Jesus always saying, "Be not afraid"? Or what about the whole, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ... For I am *gentle* and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."? What about that? How does that fit in, with "I came to bring fire to the earth," the fire of judgment and justice? How does the division talk fit in with the other witness about bringing together all the people of the earth into one family of brothers and sisters of Jesus, children of God?

I think what we forget is the fact that the latter parts depend on the former parts: the peace of Christ, and with Christ, depends on the burning, purifying, fire. What I mean is something like this: sometimes in forests, a natural chain of events occurs such that the underbrush catches on fire and burns up. As long as it stays in the forest—and not in people's houses—that's not a bad thing. The fires clear out the invasive species and the dead wood, opening that area to the flourishing of the native plants and new life and new growth. Fire is not bad in that situation, even when it is destructive. The fire makes the new life possible.

Or: people who garden spend a lot of time pulling out weeds, so that the ground can be cultivated. The weeds have to come out and be thrown—well, if not into the fire, disposed of somehow—so that something more beautiful can be there.

Or think about Darby Road, which as of this week is smooth as silk. For as long as I've been here, it has been a potholed mess. Eventually there were more potholes than road. Before it could be smoothed out, though, the whole thing had to be taken up and the road milled. So, for the last several weeks, it has been extremely rough; the potholes were gone, but so was the road. As of this week, of course, it's great, but only because the destruction enabled the re-construction. After a while you can't just patch the potholes anymore. You have to pull the whole thing up. Not potholed peace, but a stark division.

I think this is something like what Jesus is talking about. In order to become one with Christ, in order to lay our heads on his chest like beloved disciples, we have to be pure of heart. And for most of us, most of the time, our hearts aren't pure, but potholed, weedy messes, with invasive sin and dead wood. And even if we are basically good guys and gals, we still live in social systems, economic systems, cultural systems, that hurt the poor in particular. We benefit from well-heeled boots on the necks of the poor, whether we see them or not. It's easier to ignore them when we don't see them. But God sees them and, according to scriptures like today's, judges it sinful. In order to be citizens of the kingdom of God, we have to be free of that sin.

So what do we do? Jesus brings a fire that he wishes was already kindled, and here we are with all of this underbrush in our lives, in our hearts, in our communities, even in our families. There are people to whom we can look for examples: the Epistle to the Hebrews gives us those examples, but says, especially, to look to Jesus, the man of perfect faith, who shows us what perfect faith looks like.

But how are we to emulate Jesus? With all of our weeds and potholes, how are we to avoid being pulled up altogether and tossed into the consuming fire?

The good news of the gospel is that that consuming fire has already burned. The judgment and division has already been suffered. It has been suffered by Jesus Christ, on the cross, who accepted the punishment that was due to sinners. When we see Christ on the cross, we are seeing

the one whom the fire burned and the sword cut, so that it wouldn't burn and cut us. This is called grace. It is our unmerited and undeserved, but nonetheless assured, forgiveness. The sword of truth—because that's what judgment with justice is, truth—struck the one who could have wielded it against others.

This is why thundering on about judgment—using it as a cudgel to beat people whom you're mad at—is not wrong, exactly, just incomplete. Because it leaves out grace, and grace is everything.

Make no mistake: to hear the truth spoken is terrifying. To my mind, this is judgment: when the truth is told. There is your division. No more lies, no more self-justification, no more defanging what is true. The truth about the comfortable and the costs of their comfort; the truth about us who like to think of ourselves as basically good guys and good gals: that isn't going to feel like peace, it's going to feel like the sword. Slaves and slavemasters together, with the truth final spoken, and it will sound like judgment and justice.

But Christ is the good shepherd, who comes to rescue his lost sheep. He is the one who offers refreshment to sinners. He is the one in whom perfect mercy and perfect justice meet.

This combination is captured perfectly in today's collect: "Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life..." First, Christ is the sacrifice for sin who, without our deserving it, saves us. Second, he is the example of how we should live: without potholes, without underbrush or weeds. The pioneer and perfecter of faith.

So, should we approach judgment with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12)? To a certain extent, yes. Don't defang judgment and justice. The truth hurts. But also, don't be afraid; come to God in confidence because of Christ (Heb. 4:16), whose grace is everything. The last word is grace.