

Being the Church in Jesus Christ: The Wisdom of Pastor Paul

Brentwood Sermons for 2015

Here Comes the Judge

Feb 22, 2015

**Ps 25:1010 & 2 Thess 1:3-12 – Text = 2 Thess 1:3-4
(15, 39, 644, 399)**

I have two very good friends who will have nothing to do with church.

Both were raised in the church.
Both rejected it in their teens.
One still believes in God,
but wants nothing to do with the God he understands Christians to be worshipping.
His current relationship is with his Higher Power
and his spiritual community of support is Alcoholics Anonymous.
The other has rejected the existence of God altogether,
and good riddance, as far as he is concerned.

As we explore our respective perspectives,
it is apparent to me that they are rejecting an understanding of God
that I would reject as well.
They grew up with an understanding of God
as a heartless, vindictive, and mean judge.
If you didn't think like and act like
the particular group of Christians
by whom you were being raised,
you would be damned and go to hell,
suffer the "eternal damnation," "flaming fire" and "vengeance"
Paul talks about in vvs 8-9 of our passage this morning.

And there are lots of other passages in the Bible
that can be read and interpreted
to see God as a heartless, vindictive, and mean judge,
not least of which is Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats
in Matthew's gospel.

But I don't think that's what the God of the Bible is really like.
I think God gets disappointed when we mess us.
I think God hates evil and loves good.

I think that Biblical writers who were persecuted and suffering
wanted to see their oppressors and attackers punished by God.
But I don't think that's how God chose to respond.

The God of the Bible, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the God who continues to work within us and among us
through the Holy Spirit,
is a God of mercy, grace, and love.
That God's response to our messing up,
however grave and damaging that may be,
arises from a desire to restore us to our original dignity and worth,
not to punish and reject us.

We are free to choose the 'hell' of separation from God,
to choose to reject what Paul describes as
"the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might,"
but even in that situation, God does not reject us.
God remains with us and sustains us in our human existence.
But that existence is poorer and more restricted in its possibilities
than human flourishing in conscious relationship with Jesus Christ.

So, that brings us back to the question
of what kind of a judge God really is in Jesus Christ,
through the workings of the Holy Spirit.

In the language of judicial thinking today,
I believe God is revealed through the Scriptures
as a God of restorative justice rather than retributive justice.

Dr. Carolyn Boyes-Watson (2014) at Suffolk University's Center for Restorative Justice
defines restorative justice as:

*...a growing social movement to institutionalize peaceful approaches
to harm, problem-solving and violations of legal and human rights.*

*These range from international peacemaking tribunals
such as the [South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)
to innovations within the criminal and juvenile justice systems,
schools, social services and communities.*

*Rather than privileging the law, professionals and the state,
restorative resolutions engage those who are harmed,
wrongdoers and their affected communities in search of solutions
that promote repair, reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships.*

*Restorative justice seeks to build partnerships
to reestablish mutual responsibility for constructive responses
to wrongdoing within our communities.*

*Restorative approaches seek a balanced approach
to the needs of the victim, wrongdoer and community
through processes that preserve the safety and dignity of all.*

This stands in sharp contrast to the kind of retributive justice
that seems to dominate the thinking of our current Canadian government.

It's a vindictive system of incarceration as payback.

Do the crime and pay the time or the price.

Those harmed deserve to be satisfied by harsh punishments
for the wrongdoers.

So, what kind of judging can we expect from God?

I think God is a proponent of restorative justice
and wants us to do it much better and more broadly than we currently are.

That conviction is supported, I think, in our sermon text this morning.

Paul gives thanks for the ways the Thessalonian Christians
have endured persecution and suffering.

They have grown in their faith and love for one another.

They have been steadfast in their resolve to be loyal to Jesus Christ.

Their energy has been directed into witnessing
to the grace of Jesus Christ in everything they do.

That, for me, makes the language of "the punishment of eternal destruction"
out of place in talking about "the righteous judgment of God."

I can understand the pain and anger that leads to such language
in the heat of the suffering that persecution and affliction bring,
but it is not a considered description of the kind of judging that God does.

Rather, God's judging is filled with mercy and forgiveness.

It aims to restore the quality of relationships that God desires,
the love of God, others, and self that sums up all the law and the prophets.

It's the kind of justice that restores the covenant
of God loving us so we can be blessings to his creation.

It's about positive reconciliation that brings about flourishing
for the whole of creation.

The judgment of God is not meant to bring about fear and loathing,
yet that is precisely what many of our misinterpretations have done.

The judgment of God is meant to restore God's original intent for creation.

It aims to establish a peaceable commonwealth
filled with faith, hope, and love.

And do we as a church, as a community serving God's mission,
do we exercise that kind of judgment in the world?

Are our judgments, in whatever matters we are considering,
be it in church, or at home, or in the workplace,
are our judgments restorative of God's will on earth,
restoring the power and impact of faith, hope, and love?

I pray that this morning's reflections on the sermon text
have made that more possible and likely.

The other reminder from Paul's writing on this matter of God's judgment
is that it is God's judgment, not ours.
In Romans, a letter that lays out best Paul's mature and calmer thinking,
he writes:

*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;
for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."
... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."
(Romans 12:19-21)*

That good is God's mercy, God's grace, God's forgiving love.
That is how God will repay.
That, in all of its paradoxical glory,
is God's "wrath."
That seems foolish and scandalous to many of us.
But, if we sort through the Scriptures carefully and prayerfully,
that is what they say about God's way.
God's way of judging seeks to restore us to our original dignity and worth,
and not us alone, but all of his children.
We are called upon to respect and reflect that restorative justice.

Perhaps the last word should be Jesus' from the cross,
recorded by Luke, who became Paul's biographer in Acts:

*Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them;
for they know not what they are doing."*

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far
more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:20-21)*