

A Righteous God Judges People and Nations

Amos 5:21-24

Matthew 25:31-46

March 7, 2021

On my first Sunday preaching here as Interim Pastor, the cars in the parking lot were leafletted with brochures that suggested we didn't preach "judgement" enough at Grace. A year later the man who did this—though I didn't know it at the time—asked if he could come by and visit so he might witness to the gospel as he believed it. We had a pleasant conversation, and at the end of it he sheepishly admitted he was the one who put the brochures on our windshields. He must have thought there was too much grace at Grace!

Is there a place for God as judge in your beliefs? What do words like judgment, righteousness and justice mean in your spiritual life? The U.C.C. Statement of Faith sets the stage with these words about God, to God: "You judge people and nations by your righteous will

declared by prophets and apostles.” So, the title of the sermon: “A Righteous God Judges People and Nations.”

I

The words judge and judgment have a negative connotation in our minds: we judge ourselves and others in negative ways every day, many times a day. But think of the judge in a courtroom who administers justice fairly and sometimes mixed with mercy. If you have been wronged and go to court, it is a welcome sight to see a good, wise and fair-minded judge sitting behind the bench.

However, the idea of God as Judge can send shivers down our spines. Perhaps the most famous and discussed sermon in American history was by the Puritan preacher and theologian, Jonathan Edwards: “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God.” In it he pictured God suspending us over the fiery pit of hell as someone holding a spider over a flaming pit. If we sin enough God will let us drop, and we will be engulfed by the flames of hell.

No wonder then that there has been a strong reaction against such preaching and theology about God as Judge. Perhaps an overreaction, especially in more liberal forms of Christianity in America. The theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, himself raised in a form of liberal Protestantism, satirized his own tradition by depicting its theology this way:

A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.¹

There was a popular pop-psychology book about forty years ago: *I'm OK; You're OK*. Someone satirized it with a cartoon of Jesus on the cross saying, "If I'm OK and you're OK, what am I doing up here!"

So what do we do and what does God do in the face of the evil in the world? Both personal evil and social evil? I'm talking about human evil now, putting the devil aside for a while! The Old Testament has a word worth reviving: the "wicked" and "wickedness." The wicked are those who are doers of evil. And there are manifold

forms: physical and sexual abuse, cruelty, injustice, murder, just to get us started. I'm not talking about cosmic evil, but the human kind we deal out every day.

II

If there is a gone-wrongness in us and in the world, we need someone greater than we are to set things right, to “right-wise” things, to use an old word. God the righteous judge is setting things right and making things right, and this God enlists us in this rectifying work.

The prophet Amos had a vision of God dropping a plumb-line from heaven to earth, right down in our midst, so we might be able to tell right from wrong, good from evil. He was saying: “You’ve been crooked so long you don’t know what straight is anymore!”

The Hebrew prophets were sent by God to the nations of Israel and Judah to show them where they were going wrong and what would happen if they kept on their present course. They came, as the

cowboy poet put it, “just before beyond redemption.” Justice, following the laws of the Torah, meant fairness in the courts, marketplaces and laws. The prophets saw corruption in all these places. It also meant taking care of the most vulnerable: widows, orphans and strangers (or immigrants).

But justice was more than a set of laws, it was the “justice-ing” and “righteous-ing” power of God flowing like a mighty river through the land. Justice was the flowing rivers and streams that flow through the land, replenishing it. So Amos said in those words often used by Martin Luther King, Jr.:

Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Ever-flowing, that the people and nation prosper, be in good health.

There was in this image a warning. If we by our greed and lust for power dam up the flowing waters of justice, then the land below the dam begins to wither and die. And if it goes on too long the waters

heap up against the walls of the dam and break through destroying the land. To use biblical language, justice has turned to judgment and righteousness to wrath. Walter Rauschenbusch, the father of the Social Gospel movement in America wrote: “Nations die of legalized injustice.” So we are called as God’s people to begin to dismantle the dam, sometimes brick by brick.

III

There is built into the fabric of the universe a moral law that keeps human life human and sustains the life of communities and nations.

Martin Luther King, Jr., believed in such a moral law, and this belief kept him going when the dream of justice seemed so difficult to achieve. It can keep *us* going too. In one of his most memorable speeches he asked, *How long will it take?* And this is what he said.

I come to say to you this afternoon however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth

pressed to the earth will rise again. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long because you reap what you sow. How long, not long because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.²

This belief keeps us going. And God calls us to be “arc-benders” in the cause of justice and mercy, righteousness and compassion.

IV

People think of the judgment of God as the punishment of God but these are the ideas we project onto God. God’s judgment is always mixed with mercy so that it is a healing justice. God’s judgment is not God’s anger acted out on people.

I prefer to talk about the *judgment of life*. Judgment as the natural outworking of what we’ve done wrong, the this-life consequences of our sin. I’ve experienced that; you may have too. But there is a final mercy which leads us to Jesus’ parable of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25.

V

So, let's talk about the Last Judgment. I know some preachers who relish the opportunity to preach on the Last Judgment, and I know people who take pleasure in hearing about it because they are sure they are on the right side of it. They won't be "left behind" when the so-called Rapture happens, and God saves the righteous and damns the unrighteous unbelievers.

Emily Dickinson, the poet of Amherst, once went to church and heard a sermon on the Last Judgment. She wrote:

The subject of perdition seemed to please him,
somehow. It seemed so solemn to me.

So let's go to Jesus' parable of the Last Judgment. It is a parable, not a photograph! Its literal meaning is in its parabolic meaning!

Jesus began, "When the Son of Man comes into his glory and sits on his glorious throne, he will gather the nations and peoples." Note,

this parable is not just about individual persons but also about nations, peoples, communities.

Then he begins to divide the sheep from the goats. One meaning of the word “judge” is “to divide”, to be able to separate the right from the wrong, the good from the bad. We make such judgments or discernments every day—or try to.

And this is what happened. He first went to the sheep and said, Come into the kingdom prepared for you. For when I was hungry you fed me, when I was thirsty you gave me drink, when a stranger you welcomed me, when naked you clothed me, when I was sick you visited me and when I was in prison you came to me.

The sheep scratched their heads, and said, Lord, When did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, imprisoned? Then Jesus delivers the clincher: *“In as much as you have done it to one of the least of these you have done it unto me.”*

Then he turned to the goats (who at this point didn't know they were goats) and said, Depart from me. For I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and a prisoner and you turned away from me.

And they scratched their heads and said, "But Lord, we came to see you every Sunday in church!" (I made that verse up.)

Then Jesus pronounced judgment on them.

Was this Last Judgment the *end* of it all? Was it "last." I do not think so. It was the next to the last thing. The last thing is not the *Final Judgment* but the *Final Mercy*. The Book of Revelation (22:1-2) pictures it like this: a City with a river flowing through it (another river of God), and on either side of the river was a Tree of Life and on the trees were healing leaves that were for the "healing of the nations." *The Final Healing*. James Forbes the former minister of Riverside Church in New York City preached on this text at Myers Park Baptist. At the end of the sermon he went to the alter and took roses out of the vase and began to distribute their leaves to us, calling

us to be healing leaves. I still have my leaf in my book at this place in Revelation. We are the healing leaves of God

This kind of belief keeps me going as I live in a world with so much darkness, cruelty and evil. There will be a Final Healing—and we can be part of it now.

There are some Christians who call themselves “Matthew 25 Christians” because this parable portrays what real Christianity is, the care for the least of these. In our discussion Wednesday night, Billie Wilks said “This parable is *Jesus’* plumb line!” This is the heart of the matter, compassion and the love of neighbor as ourselves. I think she’s right.

Sometimes we need more believing and to take a “leap of faith”. But sometimes what we need most is a “leap of action.” Jesus and the prophets show the way.

1. H. Richard Niebuhr *The Kingdom of God in America* (N.Y.: Harper Torch Books, 1937) p. 193.

2. Cited in Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1982),p.364.