

## JUDGEMENT OR MERCY?

Psalm 51; 1 Timothy 1: 12-17; Luke 15: 1-10

You are made for great things. Do you know that? Do you feel that as a human being? Great things. The opening chapter of the bible declares that we are made in the image of God. To be made in the image of God is to be made out of love and for love. God's first act is to create the world and create a beautiful space called earth so that we can build relationships of enjoyment and care. God and us, us with each other and us with our earth. Of course there's evolution and the big bang and all that... but science doesn't tell us the why. What's the purpose of it all? That's what the opening chapters of the bible care about. It's all made out of love and for love. When love is the energy, when love is the inspiration, when love is what we experience in us and between us, then God's image is being lived out in all its creative potential.

So where has it gone wrong? Why has it gone wrong? Theologians, philosophers and ordinary people have wrestled with such questions from the beginning of time. The bible offers all kinds of stories to explain it. The bible talks of sin. Sin is about falling short of our created purpose. Sin is about missing the mark of our created purpose. If we are made out of love and for love, sin is the undermining, abusing and harming that destroys love. Even if we're not violent racists, terrorists or abusers... even if we're not like world leaders who want to deal with others by building walls and using force against those we don't like and can't trust... even if we're not like that, we're still part of the problem.

Every time we say an angry word not because we care but because we want to hurt someone... every time we force someone to do something because we want things our way or the highway... every time we want to turn every interaction and relationship to ourselves, our needs, our wants and our concerns... every time we want to put others down because we are jealous of them... every time we want to tune out the problems around us or the needs of our neighbours because it makes us uncomfortable and challenges our conscience... every time misery, complaint and blame rather than gratitude and understanding fill our hearts... every time this and so much else is what we do, we are part of the problem of sin.

But you know, even though sin is a focus in the bible because it's so real in our world, the bigger focus of the bible by far is this: what are we going to do about it? What are we going to do about it now that things have become the way they are? Does it make a difference if God is a meaningful partner on our journey? Is there a better way to deal with sin that doesn't involve cutting ourselves off or building walls to keep it all out?

There is. According to the bible there is. In fact, the bible makes a distinction between two ways. There is the way of judgement and there is the way of mercy. Which way have you chosen to work out sin in your life? Which way have you chosen to engage the world around you? Is it the way of judgement or the way of mercy?

People often mistake the bible's way as the way of judgement. People do wrong and they must be punished. Justice demands an eye for an eye. Compromise is out of the question. Going soft will not get the change that's necessary. You have to be tough on people otherwise they'll find a way to escape responsibility.

Of course there's some truth to these sentiments. But where does the energy go? Does it achieve what it's after? Judgement works through fear, guilt and threat. It uses force and sometimes violence to achieve it's ends. It manipulates and pushes people around because it believes this is the only way change can happen in a world of sin. Much religion through the centuries has chosen the way of judgement. People respond to fear and guilt. It makes them compliant, submissive and responsive. Power uses fear to get what it wants. People's egos are vulnerable and their feeling of security is fragile. Judge them and they get defensive. Undermine their confidence and sense of security and they'll be grovelling on their knees.

And isn't that how powerful nations deal with threats? Force and violence get us control, or else, we do it more subtly through benevolent colonial takeovers. We persuade ourselves and sometimes others that we know what's best for them and will determine what's best for all. Nations do it, corporations do it, people do it with each other, spouses do it, parents do it... "I am going to make you do what I want... If asking nice doesn't work, fear and threats will work, or else I will make you feel worthless or insecure with my judgement of you until you fall into line... I'll manipulate you and guilt you with my kindness and service until you feel obligated and indebted toward me. It's for your own good, trust me. You need my help one way or the other because you're lost without me." This is the way of judgement.

But, there is another way. Real change, change of heart, comes not by judgement and the fear, submission and dependency it can yield. No. Real change can only happen from the inside out. It can only come from the way of mercy. What is the way of mercy? How does it work? Let us ponder our scripture readings for a revelatory blueprint...

1) First, in order to choose the way of mercy rather than the way of judgement, we have to make sure the God we worship is the God of mercy rather than the God of judgement. This is what our psalm reading is declaring. "Have mercy on me O God, **according to your steadfast**

**love; according to your abundant mercy.”** God is a God of mercy, not a God of judgement. If mercy is not where my heart lives, I cannot be in communion with a God who is defined by mercy either.

But how do I experience the kind of growth and transformation in my heart where my feelings of judgement are purged and my heart overflows with mercy? The psalm offers the first step on this journey: I have to take responsibility for how the sin of judgement infects my heart. I have to face it, confront it and engage it. I have to come clean before God and before others who are affected by my judgement. I have to create space in myself for goodness to flourish. And so I have to purge judgement in my heart through confession: “blot out my transgression. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin,” The psalmist prays.

And even though there are many things people do to trigger me and make me justify my judgemental thoughts and negative feelings, ultimately, the psalmist declares: “I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” Connecting with God is connecting with our deepest self. We can lie and deceive others, but unless we face truth in our deepest selves, there is no transformational future for us.

But what motivates confession? Confession under threat or fear or judgement only makes us slaves who act out of fear. Under threat or fear of judgement we develop feelings of worthlessness and shame. Judgement also leads to bitterness which can lead to anger and blame. But confession under a larger mercy cleanses, renews and empowers us in our deepest selfhood. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” I will travel lighter and more alive because I am in tune with your mercy. I am not conflicted within. I have purged the spirit of judgement within me.

So then, our psalm offers us the first step – Confession of the sin of judgement in me; confession in order to purge it from my heart, in order to create space for communion with the God of mercy.

2) Now for step two. Step two is moving from inward change to outward change. Here is where our reading from Timothy can guide us. In this letter we hear the voice of the apostle Paul. He begins by telling a young disciple named Timothy whom he is mentoring, that he – Paul - has had major sin of judgement to deal with in his life. He not only hunted Christians. He was responsible for executing them. But by confronting what he had done, by approaching the people who were affected by his judgements and actions, and by bringing it all before God, he experienced something that began to completely change him – the

infinite mercy of God... the 'overflowing grace of God,' as he also calls it. By receiving such mercy and grace as 'the foremost of sinners' as he calls himself, the power of God in Christ comes alive. Christ in him is not only transforming him, but the world around him too.

The test that such transformation is happening is this: how much mercy do we have for others, not only others we like, but others we don't like? How much mercy do we share with those we judge as deficient in character or conduct? To have mercy doesn't mean we don't make judgements of right and wrong, better and worse. If we have mercy in us and compassion, we get outraged when injustice and abuse happens in our world. If we treasure the life God has given us, we don't abuse and neglect ourselves either. But does all this end in mercy or judgement? Do we find our way to mercy as our basis and foundation, or does anger, resentment, complaint and bitterness shape our life?

So then, if step one is discovering a God of mercy and then confessing our sin of judgement against such mercy, step two is sharing that mercy with the world and finding prayerful, worshipful and meditative ways to keep replenishing ourselves as life keeps happening. If we don't replenish ourselves, we will get swallowed up by feelings of judgement very quickly.

3) And finally, our scriptures complete the journey with the experience of celebration and joy. If we are made out of love and for love, then we are made for joy also. It's not about things never going wrong. It's not about never experiencing loss or heartache or disappointment. Life is full of that, as many of you know. Vulnerability is built into the heart of things and the more we love and care, the more we are vulnerable to grief. However, love and mercy are also what lead to the greatest kind of joy.

Jesus tells two parables, and he directs them to those who are very judgemental in their hearts. The Pharisees follow moral do's and don'ts very strictly. But the God they worship is a God of judgement rather than a God of mercy. Jesus wants to teach them the true God of mercy. The God of mercy is like a shepherd who is so concerned about one missing sheep, he is willing to risk leaving the other ninety-nine sheep unattended to go find the missing one. And when he finds it, not only he but all of heaven rejoices. The God of mercy is like a woman who desperately searches for a lost coin. And when she finds it she is so thrilled that she throws a party to celebrate, spending that coin and others besides just to share her joy. People are like that lost sheep and lost coin. We can blame them and judge them for the trouble they're in and the ways they trouble us; or, the Christ mercy in us can open our hearts to them and we can genuinely celebrate when good things happen in their lives.

Mercy is not rational. It comes from the heart and when we taste it, we are enthralled by it. It grabs hold of us and feeds us in a way that nothing else can. Mercy is the food we need to grow beautiful spiritually, the way we need healthy food for our bodies. The question is: who and where do we go for our source?

Through prayer, worship and meditation... through meaningful fellowship... through opportunities to give, serve and express gratitude... and finally, through holy communion, we are invited to celebrate with God the mercy that has found us and is transforming us on our spiritual journey. Every confrontation with judgement in our hearts that leads to confession... every time mercy enlarges our hearts... every time we feel like celebrating because people find their way out of the hole they've been in... Every time this happens in us, God's image is being lived out. Every time the bread and wine we consume becomes Christ in us and between us, there is rejoicing in heaven.

Let us pray: cleanse our hearts, O God, cleanse our hearts of the judgement that lives in us... create space in us for your mercy... and may the mercy we eat and drink become the mercy we share with the world around us... Amen.