

Judgement Reconsidered: Fiery Love

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: Jeremiah 1.4-10;
 Psalm 71.1-6;
 Hebrews 12.18-29;
 Luke 13.10-17

I don't know how your week has gone for you but my week was incredibly rich and full. On Monday night I was at Maple Avenue Ministries in a training with Lisa Sharon Harper. She is currently on staff with Sojourners in Washington DC but has worked in LA, NYC, and was active in community organizing in Ferguson and Baltimore. She is unabashedly evangelical speaking primarily to evangelicals about her deep conviction that if the gospel is to be good news it must engage the church in the work of social justice. A gospel that only speaks to personal salvation or individual comfort is a very thin gospel indeed. The great commandment after all is to love both God and neighbor. And as you live out love of neighbor in public it is called *justice*. In her latest book *The Very Good Gospel* she explores what makes for a thick gospel. She claims that our access to the very good gifts of God's creation¹ get set up in the policies and structures of our communal life where things like education and health care, and public safety and economics play out. So I went on Monday expecting to hear Lisa preaching to the choir as I'm already convinced of these things. I was delighted when she went beyond those assumptions to teach us to see the unique gifts we bring as people of faith to the work of social justice and then to equip us for that work with some practical tools she has learned along the way. It was a full night.

Then there was Wednesday night and Thursday morning with a long dinner and leisurely breakfast sitting around a table with a dozen or so people sharing unscripted conversation with Old Testament Scholar and Biblical Theologian, Walter Brueggemann. Whether you think you know

¹ This is a reference to Genesis 1.31 when God surveys the entirety of the creation and calls it *very good*.

him or not if you have sat in these pews for any length of time you have gotten Walter Brueggemann because both Pastor Gordon and I turn to his work with regularity and have been shaped by his theology. His work has pushed us to see the social impact of the good news as it comes to us through the Hebrew scriptures. Often by bringing the communal life of those who told and pass on these stories into our imagination. It didn't surprise me to see that Walter Brueggemann had written the forward for Lisa Sharon Haper's book.

So we asked Walter what's stirring in his imagination as he looks out at the world and the mission of the church at this time. Something he said multiple times throughout our time together was that we have to contend with the reality that the church has been a wounding institution that has profoundly impacted our credibility in the world. Then he shared with us where that is leading him in his work these days. As I said, it was a rich and full week and my head and heart are still expanding as I think about all that was shared in these days.

We all want the church, the body of Christ, to be a place full of life and healing, that promotes peace and justice, that creates community that is expansive and inviting. So what has stood in our way? If I were to zero in on a single contributing factor knowing that there are probably many I would point to the church's history of preaching a God of Judgment and then our practice of standing in the place of God to execute that judgment for ourselves. Before we get too self-satisfied in seeing ourselves as an exception to that characterization – let's just keep in mind that progressives can be some of the most judgmental folk out there. I know many of us have firsthand experience with that kind of judgment and it is excruciating; it is deadly to the human soul.

What do we do with texts like the ones before us today? All summer long we've been reading the prophets which are full of messages of judgment. But it's not the Old Testament alone. There is plenty of judgment that comes through the gospels and the letters like this one from Hebrews today where God is described as a blazing fire and a tempest shaking the earth as the judge of all.

On the other hand we have the Psalm describing God as a God of salvation, as a rock of refuge, the One who is our hope and trust. We have the gospel where we see God's compassionate heart in action through Jesus. He's teaching in one of the synagogues when a woman appears presumably on the periphery. Women weren't allowed to be in the center with the rabbi. Jesus notices her lurking on the edges and sees her; the suffering of her body and soul. He calls her over and sets his hands on her and heals far more than just her body. As a person wrestling with an ailment of both body and mind (which is how I read the statement that it was a spirit that had crippled her) being on the periphery was probably the story of her life. For Jesus to even notice her, for him to stop what he was doing which was teaching the Torah in a public place, to call her over into the center and to place his hands on her body - a body that I imagine all kinds of people All crossing the road to avoid touching. As I say, the healing was of far more than just her body.

When you lay these texts side by side like this it almost sounds like two different Gods - doesn't? The God of Judgment OR The God of Love. I'm sure it won't shock you to hear me say that it is a false choice. It becomes really clear how false a choice it is when we remember what the scriptures mean by judgment and the way the God embodies that judgment verses the way the Church has so frequently talked about judgment and embodied that judgment. Part of the problem is that Dante's Inferno has forever impacted how we hear the metaphor of fire. The Christian church for many centuries has talked about fire as an instrument of punishment. Judgment has come to equal punishment in our imaginations. When we hear God being described as a blazing fire that is the association that comes into our mind.

When in fact, fire, as a metaphor in scripture is not about punishment but about purification. Remember the refiner's fire from Malachi that is sung in Handel's Messiah? Here is how one commentator describing the way that fire is used in the process of purifying metals: "The smelter melts and pours off the gold or silver, then skims off the dross until he can see his own face reflected in the molten metal (and then goes on to say) - not a bad

metaphor for God's judgment..."² What gets confronted in us, in the moments when we come up against the judgment of God, is not even really the "sin" itself. What gets confronted is all of the lies or the false ways of thinking or presenting ourselves that are getting in the way of God's image in us.

When Jesus confronts (judges if you will) the leaders of the synagogue who were scandalized by the healing of a woman on the Sabbath day, he is helping them to burn away the dross that had covered up the good gift of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was never intended to be an oppressive set of rules that would lead you to set aside love for your neighbor. It certainly was never meant to become a badge of honor that elevates those who can follow these oppressive rules over and above those who don't. It wasn't just a single behavior in the moment that Jesus was scolding them about. He was interested (in the words of Jeremiah) to pluck up and pull down the whole mentality, mindset, and attitude and habits that had grown up around this concept of Sabbath. And it was as much for their own liberation as much as for this woman's. I have come to think about God's judgment as an expression of God's fiery love for us.³

About a week and half ago Gordon and I sat down with the Personnel committee to go over our annual review. Maybe some of you have looked forward to those moments, if you've had them in your work life, every year where there is a formal moment to receive people's judgment but I confess over the years, especially in the early years, that it is has been a source of some anxiety for me. In fact, some of those early reviews I would just scan through the section on praise and appreciation (blah, blah) looking for the criticisms. Those "judgments" were going to live large in my psyche no matter what else was in the review. I'm overstating this a nudge but only a nudge. I was grateful when I saw the NY Times piece a couple of months ago now that explained why we tend to hold on to criticism and set aside appreciation and it has to do with evolutionary biology. I never stay very long in that anxious place but I give myself a few minutes every year to let those old - now I know to call them ancient -

² Gray Temple, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 378.

³ While this phrase "fiery love" came my from my own reflections over many years I was delighted to see that the same commentator quoted above uses the phrase later in his commentary...*ibid*, 378

scripts have their say before I invite the Spirit to come with me into a different space.

Last year when the feedback came just from consistory and ministry chairs there were a few comments - judgements - that really hit the nail on the head re: some growing edges for me. Honestly, when I read those comments from these leaders who I deeply respect and who I know love me - I actually felt seen and known. Because they were exactly right. And their feedback was not some petty complaint lobbed from the back row designed to put me in my place and to elevate themselves by comparison. That is the broken judgmentalism that the church has a nasty history of perpetuating. No, their feedback whether they knew it or not, was this helpful revealing of some dross in my life; some beliefs, some attitudes, some habits of mind that occasionally show up in my behavior that was pure dross that needed (and needs) to be burned away so that the image of God can be more clearly experienced in my life.

That is what the judgment of God is like.... fiercely honest, but deeply compassionate bringing forward the image of God in us as individuals and as communities for the sake of the very good gospel Jesus came to proclaim.

So I say thanks be to God for this fiery love that is full of compassion and judgment for our sake and for the sake of the world. Amen!