

*The Rub of Reconciliation: Judgement and Grace*  
Season of Reconciliation/Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday  
January 14, 2018  
Jill R. Russell

Texts: 1 Samuel 3. 1-10 (11-20);  
Psalm 139. 1-6, 13-18;  
1 Corinthians 6. 12-20;  
John 1.43-51

Some of you may have read the article I wrote for the January newsletter. I shared some reflections that were beginning to stir in me as we were coming into this time we call the Season of Reconciliation. If you read those reflections, perhaps it isn't surprising to see the title for the sermon this morning: *The Rub of Reconciliation: Judgement and Grace*.

As I said in the article, I will say again here: I LOVE stories of reconciliation. I love hearing about people finding their way back to each other after years of estrangement. I love stories of people offering forgiveness and finding mercy when they least deserve it. Tears come instantly when I hear them because they reflect so beautifully the gospel of our Lord and because they are so rare in this world in which we live where we are so prone to hold grudges and nurse resentments. So why talk of judgment when we are just getting out of the gate? It seems so counter to the spirit we need to cultivate in this season.

I understand the discomfort of talking about judgment because I share it. I looked at the passage from 1 Samuel and I noticed that the lectionary gives an option to just read verses 1-10. Verses 11-20 were in parentheses which means we didn't have to read the part where we hear what God actually has to say once Samuel realized who was calling in the night. We could have left the words of judgment on the cutting room floor.

It was tempting because I am right there with the elders who met this past Monday night. We read from the Book of Church Order about one of our responsibilities as Elders which is to provide discipline for any member of

the church who “continues in sin without repentance.”<sup>1</sup> Several of us recoiled at the language of that provision. It sounded so judgmental as if we as Elders were sitting on some high horse. And we could conjure horror stories from generations past (and in some cases in our community even today) where boards of Elders seemed to take great pride in sitting in such judgment. We want nothing to do with that ethos here at Hope Church. At the end of the day it was really the language of this provision that we wanted to change. Because we recognized that there is a flip side if we abandoned all together this call to be concerned for the struggles and realities of people’s lives.

While I’ve heard stories about people scarred from being called before the board of elders to give an account for some piece of their life, I’ve also heard stories of great pain when the church turned a blind eye to something destructive happening. Every community I’ve served (including this one) I’ve heard at least one if not more of these stories as well. Where abuse was happening, and people knew, and no one said a word. In several cases these weren’t just members of the church. These were ordained leaders in the church and no one did anything.

We’ve known for some time that judgment exercised as moral superiority is deadly. We’re at a moment culturally where we are coming to a deeper recognition that the flip side of turning a blind eye is just as deadly. We have not yet found a way forward to deal with the shame that is tied up with our human experiences of judgment. Shame is so deadly. It’s not like guilt where you feel badly for something you have done. Shame goes far deeper to the core of who we are as human beings.

Make no mistake, shame WAS often (not always but often) what those boards of elders were peddling. And it’s not just the church. The “calling out” culture on social media is doing the same. When shame is inflicted so persistently and so frequently in the church and in the culture – it’s everywhere. When it is everywhere, it becomes internalized. Which creates a whole other problem.

---

<sup>1</sup> Book of Church Order, 1.1.5 Sec 4, pg 22 of the 2017 Edition

So that now when people have no intention of inflicting shame - when all they are doing is signaling that something is wrong and needs attention - the flash of shame can come nonetheless from the inside. Once it comes, the person feeling shame shuts down. They either become defensive and angry so they don't have to feel the pain. Or they come a puddle of tears completely consumed by their shame. Either way, the focus has shifted. It's no longer about the concern or the problem that needs attention it's ALL about the way the person feels who is being confronted.

If you are a person of color or have talk to a person of color who has ever tried to confront a white person about a moment of prejudice or racism you know exactly what I'm talking about. The conversation very quickly shifts from what the person did that was hurtful and becomes all about how the person feels about being accused of racism.

I'm going to stop right there as I could clearly go on all day. I will simply say that all of this complexity sat behind the instinct to avoid verses 11-20. Because judgment in human hands so quickly becomes judgmental and because shame gets so tangled in the mix, you can see why it's easier to just turn the other way.

But God does not do this with us. And I am learning to say: "I'm glad." If we long for true reconciliation - the kind where wrongs are made right and where what is broken is made whole - then we have to be open to judgment. By which I simply mean an assessment of what needs to change.

When Samuel was born Israel was in a broken, deadly place. The cycles of violence and corruption were never ending. Just read the book of Judges. And Eli knew that there was nothing more he could do. Because he longed for Israel to be whole and because he trusted that God was good and what God wanted for Israel was good, when he was confronted with God's assessment - God's judgment - he relinquished his position and his power. Because he understood that judgment - an honest assessment - was the starting place for grace.

The only way I know to come to the kind of relinquishment that we see in Eli in this text is when you have taken Psalm 139 and passages like it deep

into your bones. When you know in the deepest core of your being that God has searched you and known you – that God knit you together in your mother’s womb – that you are fearfully and wonderfully made – that God has loved you from before the foundations of the earth – that you are in fact God’s Beloved....that is when you can stand before any assessment that may come with an open heart and open hands and a willingness to see what needs to be changed.

When I hear Jesus telling his would be disciples at the time of their calling that if they follow him they will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man – I hear that as invitation to receive the messages of God. Remember our discussion about the meaning of angels as messengers in Advent? I hear this as an invitation to receive the messages of God so that God’s will can be done on earth as it is in heaven

The call to follow is an invitation to change.

I have an invitation to offer today in honor of Martin Luther King Day tomorrow, especially if you have the day off but even if you don’t. I invite you to read the entirety of his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.<sup>2</sup> I’ll warn you that it will take a bit of time – it’s about 7,000 words. You can find it easily online but for those who don’t use computers there are a couple copies on the Welcome Center Desk.

I want us to read this together as a congregation for two reasons. The first is for the content itself. If we care about reconciliation when it comes to race in this country, what Dr. King has to say in this letter to the white moderate churches is as relevant today as it was when it was written. If we want to enter in helpful ways to the work of racial equity or even if we want to engage in discussions about race in a helpful way, we need hear and integrate the content of this letter.

But I also want to us to read this because Dr. King does such a beautiful job of bringing forward his judgment - his assessment of what is wrong - in a

---

<sup>2</sup> [Link to Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)

way that is grounded in his deep knowledge that the people he is talking to and about are known and loved by God in the ways we hear today in Psalm 139. He makes the case for why we need to be open to the rub of reconciliation and to the way that judgment can open us to the grace that makes way for change.

When we know that God is the One who searches us and knows us and loves us, we can open ourselves even to the tough assessments because we trust the One who will walk with us and sustain us and when we come to the end will still be with us.

So let us dare to open our eyes.

Amen.