



Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
July 7, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's readings – from Galatians and Luke – both contain elements of judgment. St. Paul tells us that God is not mocked, if we live by the Spirit we will experience life as God intended and if we live by the flesh we will pay the price for that. As Jesus sends out the 70 he tells them how to pronounce judgment on the places that reject their message – by shaking the dust from their feet and moving.

God's judgment against sin and evil is a common subject in both the Old and New Testament and I find it interesting that even though we are sometimes concerned about what God might do we also find a lot of humor in God's judgment. How many jokes begin with something like "a man dies and finds himself standing before God"? Or how many jokes have you heard that begin with something like "a priest, a rabbi, and an atheist are together on judgment day."

Here's another example. A pit bull, a chihuahua, and a cat all die and appear before the Judgment Seat of Heaven. God asks the pit bull, "Why should you get into Heaven?" The pit bull says, "I protected my family for years, and died saving them from a crazed killer."

God says, "Well done, boy. Come sit at my right hand. How about you, Mr. Snuffles?" The chihuahua says "I didn't die heroically, but I did provide love and comfort to an elderly lady in her last years."

"Good enough. Come sit on my left." God turns to the cat. "How about you? Why should you get into Heaven?" The cat looks up and calmly says, "because you're in my chair."

I do wonder sometimes, though, is God's judgment a laughing matter? I mean, on the one hand if we believe that the eternal and almighty being that created us is going to judge our actions some day it seems that we should at least be a little bit concerned about how that will work out for us. On the other hand, it is one of the great things about human nature that we seem to be able to find the humor in everything: birth, life, death,

storms and fair weather, success and failure, and even judgment day. Since we believe we are made in God's image it seems reasonable to believe that God has a sense of humor about these things as well.

How then, are we to read these words of judgment when we come across them in texts like the ones we hear today? Should we take them with great solemnity or with a humorous grain of salt? I'd like to suggest that – in good Episcopal fashion – we find the middle ground between taking God too seriously or simply laughing off God's expectations for us.

For me, the middle ground is found in God's adoption of humanity as his children through Jesus Christ. In Christ the life of the Triune God has been opened to humanity and God the Father has made us his children through God the Son in the gracious life of God the Holy Spirit. What Christ the Son of God is by nature we are now by our adoption into Christ: beloved children of the one truly good and loving Father.

So, whenever we read passages about judgment we have to read them as expressions of the loving heart of the Father of Jesus Christ who is now our Father in heaven. We cannot read these passages as the words of a demanding judge or a harsh sheriff. We also cannot read them in the voice of any abusive parents we may have experienced in this life. We have to read God's words through the lens of who Jesus is and who Jesus reveals God to be.

That means that God's words of judgment are serious – because God seriously loves us and his passion and dream for humanity is that human community would look like and live like the divine community of the Triune life. At the same time, as serious as these words are, they are words spoken out of loving concern for our welfare and out of a heart that loves more than we love ourselves. The seriousness and the humor are both appropriate and the middle ground between them is the heart of who God is.

I will be returning to this theme of the loving judgment of a loving Father repeatedly in the weeks to come as we read our way through the Gospel of Luke. You probably don't remember, but back during Advent, when we first launched into Luke, I talked about how Luke's Gospel – more so than the other three – calls us to account before God for the ways in which our systems of power and economics may hurt our fellow human beings. Over the course of the next 20 Sundays we are going to work our way through the next 10 chapters of Luke – and some of these 10 chapters are among the most challenging in Luke or any Gospel. We will hear familiar words that comfort us and we will hear words that startle us and may make us very uncomfortable.

In fact, as soon as this coming Sunday we are going to be confronted with the Parable of the Good Samaritan – and if all you remember about that parable is what you learned in Sunday School about being nice to your neighbor, you may find next Sunday a bit challenging. I intend to face head-on the challenging and, at times, judgmental words of God in Christ as we hear them week by week in the months ahead. But as I do I also plan to keep reminding us of who it is that is challenging our prejudices, our blind spots, and our sins. It is our loving Father in heaven who desires for us only what is best for us and for all those around us.

Yes, God's judgment is serious but it is also for our own good and for the good of those around us – both our friends and our enemies. As our collect says today: God has taught us to keep his commandments by loving him and our neighbors. May he grant us the grace of his Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to him with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection. And may that same Holy Spirit give us the grace to hear the word of God in the words of St. Luke with open, repentant, and faithful hearts.

Amen.