

If We Were Judges

LAST SUNDAY OF THE CHURCH YEAR, Proper 29a November 26, 2017

MATTHEW 25:31-46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

If we were judges, things could be different.

If we were judges, we could look at those kidnapping and selling slaves in West Africa, at those imprisoning families in North Korean slave camps, those tormenting young women in Pakistan, and we could pronounce proper judgement.

You shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet your neighbor's house or wealth or anything that belongs to your neighbor—that's the Law; the verdict, death.

If we were judges, we could look at those marrying multiple wives in the Middle East, at those practicing human-trade of young women, at those in Washington or Hollywood or elsewhere using women as if possessions, at those tearing up families, we could look at those tempting young men and women to despise the institution of natural marriage of man and woman, and we could pronounce judgment.

You shall not commit adultery, and what God joins together, you shall not separate—that's the Law, and the verdict is condemnation.

If we were judges, we could give a sharp eye to corruption in our own state, to dishonest contracts or deals, to the thievery around us of automobiles and property and wealth, and we could pronounce judgment.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself—that's the Law, and the verdict would destroy all who treat neighbor and property without respect.

If we were judges, we would finally look in the mirror, remembering our Lord's word that anyone angry with his brother is guilty already of murder, and anyone having lusted in his heart is guilty already of adultery—and seeing our own face in the mirror, we would know the verdict.

And so we find out about the Law. The Law which we so easily throw at those overseas who are doing violence—and whose actions are, indeed, condemned by the Law, and the Law we so quickly bring to bear against those mistreating marriage and those tempting young people to unnatural relations, the Law we even so quickly can use to identify wrongs and weaknesses in our brothers and sisters in the Church, that same Law doesn't stop when we're finished with it; it ricochets with fury, convicting our own unclean hearts.

The Law finally, as we see the face in the mirror, judges and condemns, driving some to shame, some to depression, some to desperate attempts of self-justification, but it lets out of its grips not a single one.

If we were judges, we would think we have the Law under our control, to be used as our wisdom determines, but then would find God's Law as an untamed wind, blowing where it wills, sowing guilt and shame, dividing neighbor from neighbor in recrimination, even bringing division among brothers and sisters in the Church as we are found judging one another, until we would find God's Law hitting its ultimate target of our own consciences.

If we were judges, we would leave no room for the Son of Man in all his glory who sits on his throne.

But he is judge. Not us. And that fact saves us.

For he is the One who has taken our sin upon himself, even the sin of the whole world, including our neighbor close, and our neighbor far away, including those who have done violence in West Africa or other far places, or those doing violence in our own city, including our neighbor committing adultery, our neighbor who is tempting youth to consider unnatural relations, including those against whom we are harboring retribution, including the one who is covering sin from prying eyes, including the one we see when we look in the mirror—Jesus has taken it all upon himself, has taken the judgment of the Law in its fullest, and has atoned for it all, shedding his holy blood in the place of every sinner on the cross.

He is judge. He who was accounted the greatest sinner of all, having taken our sin and the sin of the world upon himself, he who gave himself over to the final blow of judgment on the cross, he is judge.

The verdict he has for the worst sinners we can name in some far away land, for the most despised sinners we can name as we scroll through our news, for the sinner who cries in bed night, finding himself or herself in a spiral of despair, for each of us as we look into the Law's mirror, the verdict he speaks: *I forgive you. You are clean because of the word I have spoken to you. You stand at the face of my Father innocent, justified, and clothed in my righteousness.*

Before his throne, Jesus will gather all nations, all peoples, and will separate one from another, a shepherd separating sheep from goats.

To those on his right, *Come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I thirsted and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*

When did we do this? Did we love our neighbor this way? No. But he did, and does. And he accounts his righteousness to us, and our faith looks not to our own works, but his.

When we now love our neighbor, and invite the stranger, and visit the lonely, and feed one who

hungers, and give generously, we do it not to sneak ourselves into the sheepfold, but we do it as those who have already been called into the sheepfold by the voice of the Shepherd, by the Word of Gospel—we do it as those belonging to him, those he honors by making us his servants to neighbor.

To those on his left, *Depart from me, you cursed ones, to the fire prepared for the devil and his demons, for you gave no food to me in my hunger, you welcomed me not, and the generosity of your gifts was as hard as a cold rock.*

These cursed ones, they are not those more sinful than another, not those who somehow tallied more guilt, as if God is nothing but a green-shaded bookkeeper, but are those who seeing the judgement Christ Jesus took upon himself in willingly hanging on the cross, and hearing his word of invitation and his abundant forgiveness, said to him, *You are not my judge, not my justifier, but I will handle the Law myself, I will use it against others and I will earn my own righteousness under it*, and, then, having wielded the Law, they find it finally doing its terrible work, casting them into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

But now, it's the Word of Jesus—to you and me and our children.

Jesus, on the Last Day, sits on the Throne. Only he can forgive, only he can cast into Hell.

He is not, though, now silent. He speaks his word of Gospel to gather us into his sheepfold, into his Church.

In this Church, he is faithfully having the word of his crucifixion for all sinners proclaimed, and clothing sinners in righteousness in his gift of Baptism, and giving himself to sinners in his Body and Blood for the forgiveness of all sin—to his Church he is daily sending forth his Holy Spirit to keep us in his words, daily making us his people.

In this Church, then, until he comes again on the Last Day, he is setting us as his servants not to hold onto sins but to speak kindness and grace to one another, and he is honoring us by setting us as his servants to our neighbor.

In Adam, in Adam's sin which we inherited, all have died. But in Christ, all are made alive.

He is our judge, and the judgment he speaks is the judgment he purchased with his own blood on the cross. It is the verdict, *you are justified, you are clean, I have made you my own, you belong to life.*

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.