

Sermon
3 Pentecost-6B
St. Andrew's, Methuen
June 13, 2021
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Ezekiel 17:22-24
Psalm 92:1-4,11-14
2 Corinthians 5:6-10,[11-13],14-17
Mark 4:26-34

One summer Sunday back in 2010 while serving as rector of Grace Church, New Bedford, the actor Sam Waterson showed up in a seersucker suit to worship with us. One of our members, a respected psychotherapist, said she didn't see Sam Waterson, the man with a house in Mattapoisett and who is an active Episcopalian, rather she saw one of his most famous TV characters, District Attorney Jack McCoy from the long-running TV show "Law and Order". She said she wanted to go over at the Peace and give him advice about how to solve the personal problems he has on the show.

Our culture is captivated by courtroom drama, real or imagined. We pull for the prosecutors to convict and punish the guilty and we hope the defense will protect and free the innocent.

I think of all this because of a startling line in the second reading today: Paul says: **"For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil."**

Our Puritan and Catholic forbears worried a lot about divine judgment, but I know few Episcopalians today who do. I think that is largely because we've inherited a 2-dimensional God, all sunshine and lollipops, who would never judge nice folks like us.

This view, of course, ignores the Jesus we see in the gospels. The Jesus who calls out the Pharisees as blind guides and empty sepulchers, and drives the money-changers out of the temple. **The real Jesus, who reflects the real God, cares about authenticity and justice, and came to free us from our narcissism so we might reflect the love God has for us to our neighbors.**

Jesus's judgment begins the moment we consciously see him as he really is: **a fully authentic and just human being in union with Divine Love.**

As a friend puts it: it's like what happened to some of us boys when our mother visited our dorm room in college: she doesn't have to say a word, because as she stands in the midst of our dirty laundry on the floor and posters of half-naked women on the walls, we can't help but experience the judgment that we have fallen short of who we are created to be.

This is why I find the painting of Christ in the sacristy helpful:

The painting by Florence Kroger is not great art—she was known for her paintings of cute kittens—but it does present the face of Jesus as a person of depth and who we can imagine saying and doing the things Jesus does in the gospels.

Just walking with Jesus in our imagination is enough to stimulate judgment in our own souls, a judgment that leads us into the image of God we are.

The more real Jesus is to us, the more real his healing judgment and forgiveness will also be.

But we may wonder: Didn't Paul also say that we are "saved by grace through faith"?

Didn't he write in Romans 8:1 "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"?

So how do we put these two things together: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus" and "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil."

A few weeks ago I talked about those who have had a NDE—a near death experience in which a person's spirit leaves their near-dead body and travels into another dimension of light and love.

I again recommend a new book by psychiatrist Bruce Greyson called [After: A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal about Life and Beyond](#). In his research over 50 years of hundreds of NDEs, 25% reported having a life review during their experience. **The vast majority of these described this life review as more vivid than ordinary memories.** Half of those who experienced a life review experienced a sense of judgment, most often judging themselves, about the rightness or wrongness of their actions. More than half experienced these past events, not only through their own eyes, **but also from the viewpoint of others, feeling those peoples' emotions** as well as their own." *After*, page 41-42

We are saved by grace and part of the function of grace is to hold us accountable for our lives, so that we might confess how we have hurt others and thereby grow-up into the full stature of Christ.

So Christ's judgment flows out of Christ's love. But it can be hard to remember this when we reflect on the fact that when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313 AD, new church buildings were modeled on the Roman courthouse with its long pews in straight rows facing a raised area where men in robes preside. 1700 years later our courts and churches have the same ancient look: long pews in straight rows facing a raised area where mostly men in robes preside. **I wonder if this is one reason we might find it hard to experience God's love as we sit in a space built to project human law.**

What is crucial for us to remember is that the one who died and rose again for us is our judge and him alone. Christ is clear that we are not to judge one another.

And Paul is clear that we not even to judge ourselves.

Paul writes in 1st Corinthians 4: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. **I do not even judge myself.** ⁴ I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. **It is the Lord who judges me.** ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God."

So rather than imagining district attorney Jack McCoy prosecuting us, we are better served to see our judgment like a medical procedure to remove a cancerous tumor. **As Jesus says: "I have come to heal the sick, not the well."**

Christ's judgment is the best thing that happens to us: it saves us from the ruthless judgment we often give ourselves and it heals our wounds, so we can forgive and heal others and grow into the full stature of Christ.

So let's end with Paul's excellent summation of the good news of what God does for us in Jesus Christ: "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

Thanks be to God.