

WGUMC August 10, 2104 Apostles' Creed:
"He shall come again to judge the living and the dead."
Hosea 11:1-5,8-9; Revelation 20:11-15

For the past fifty years, we have been a tough-on-crime country. Our attitude has been, "Lock 'em up and throw away the key." And so we have mandatory minimum sentences, three strikes laws, and other ways of keeping people in prison longer and longer. Today, we are seeing the disastrous results of that policy. The United States has 5% of the world's population and 25% of its prison inmates. Nowadays, most states spend more on prisons than they do on schools. This year, California will spend \$62,000 per inmate and \$9200 per K-12 student.*

Our tough-on-crime approach has been especially harsh for African Americans who are given, on average, 20% longer sentences than whites who commit similar crimes.** And here's something that will shock you: though only 14% of drug users are African American, they make up 53% of people going to

prison for a drug offense.** And when those African Americans get out of prison, they face the same types of legalized discrimination that their forefathers faced for most of American history. Many of them can't vote or serve on a jury; they can't get a job; they don't qualify for student loans or housing vouchers or food stamps. Civil Rights lawyer and author Michelle Alexander has a name for this system. She calls it "The New Jim Crow."

So what made our country so tough on crime and so soft on injustice? Every time I get called for jury duty, I think, "How can I judge someone who may well have had more than three strikes against them before they were even born? And if I judge them, what am I going to do when Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead?"

The Apostles' Creed reminds us that Jesus will make the final judgment, so it would be helpful to know what that judgment looks like. Does it look like the court scene in The

Revelation? Is there a white throne around which legions are gathered, waiting to be judged according to what they have done? Is there a Book of Life and, for anyone whose name is not in it, is there a lake of fire?

When we sentence criminals, we sometimes say that we are throwing the book at them, because we can't actually throw them in the lake of fire, however much we'd like to. You see, the lake of fire is just the kind of fantasy that people who are hurt and angry and afraid often cling to.

The Book of Revelation was addressed to some Christians who were hurt and angry and afraid. They were victims of local persecutions in various parts of the Roman Empire. With this in mind, what do we make of all the violent imagery in this book: the war in heaven, the beasts and the dragon, the seven plagues and seven bowls of wrath, the lake of fire and all the rest? How about looking at these wild visions as the big-screen nightmare version of all the anger, hurt and fear bottled up

inside these early Christians. Here is a people who desperately need to believe that Jesus is going to win and that the bad guys will get it in the end. This book was written for them.

But now we have a problem. What happens when our understanding of God's judgment comes from a place of hurt and anger and fear? The problem is: Judge Jesus doesn't live there. And if we do, if we human beings fill up with anger and fear, we won't be able to resist the temptation to seize that white throne. We will be so anxious to sit in the judgment seat that we won't wait until the Last Day to start filling the lake of fire.

For some of us, in fact, every day is Judgment Day. And this is where it begins: when we wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and say, "You're not young enough, beautiful enough, smart enough, or successful enough. You're losing your hair and losing your figure. You're plain losing it. What

happened to you, anyway? What about your job, your marriage, your self-esteem, your soul?

Every morning, we can look in that mirror and play the judge and throw ourselves into a lake of fire, just so that no one else can beat us to it. And then we can spend the rest of the day putting other people there, too. It's a sick twist on the Golden Rule: If we really try, we can treat others just as badly as we treat ourselves!

But when we live in that place of hurt and anger and fear, and we start judging, the violence we do to ourselves and others starts spreading. From our neighborhoods to foreign nations, much of the violence we see in the world today started out with ordinary people playing judge and kicking Jesus out of a job.

So it's high time we learned a different way. We need a new understanding of Judgment Day. And I found one in, of all places, the Old Testament.

I know that there are plenty of us who think that the God of the Old Testament is a pretty tyrannical judge—a God of Law, not of Love—but this passage in Hosea will make us rethink the Hebrew Bible. Here in Chapter 11, you won't find a lake of fire, but you will find arms of mercy. Even though Israel was a rebellious child, God was still the doting parent. "I taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms...I led them with cords of human kindness...I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them."

This Hebrew God is a loving parent, but not a permissive one. When Israel went astray, God did call them to account. In other words, like a good parent, God let them suffer the natural consequences of their actions. They went after other gods, so they got run over by other nations. "They shall return to the land of Egypt and Assyria shall be their king because they have refused to return to me." So, the sword raging in their cities is not God's sword. The violence they are experiencing is of their

own making. The divine judgment they are feeling they have brought on themselves.

How often do we blame God for the troubles we bring on ourselves? But here, the separation from God cuts both ways. We aren't the only ones hurting. God hurts, too. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboi'im?" [Admah and Zeboi'im are two cities that were utterly destroyed.] And when I think of all that destruction, "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender."

In other words, God agonizes over us, God grieves for us, and then God determines not to dish out what we deserve. No, God says, "I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, [I do not live in that place of anger as you do], and I will not come in wrath."

There's that scary word. But as I see it, the wrath of God is way overblown. Julian of Norwich was a medieval mystic who had something very modern to say about God's wrath. When she envisioned the judgment of God, she said, "I saw no wrath except on [our] side, and [the Lord] forgives that in us, for wrath is nothing else but a perversity and an opposition to peace and to love. And it comes from a lack of power or a lack of wisdom or a lack of goodness, and this lack is not in God, but it is on our side." [Julian of Norwich, *Showings*]

What Julian is saying is that what may seem like the wrath of God to us is often just our own wrath projected onto God. It is our own harsh judgment of others that we make in order to cover up the fault in ourselves. It's the old speck in another's eye that we can see despite the log in our own. And if this is what God's judgment looks like to us, it is because we are mortals, not God.

Remember this: God's judgment never comes without God's grace. In fact, God judges us *so that* God can forgive us. When Christ came the first time, he came not to condemn the world, but to save it. [John 3:17] And when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead, he will come not to dole out punishment (for we are quite capable of doing that on our own) but to take the punishment away, to release the prisoners, to rehabilitate the criminals, to rebuild the bridge that crosses the chasm that separates us from God.

A Supreme Court decision and a state budget crisis finally brought the California prison system to its knees. And that's a good place to be if you want to pray. I am giving thanks that there is finally a renewed emphasis on rehabilitation and reducing recidivism, if not out of compassion, then at least out of the realization that we can't afford to keep all these low level offenders in jail forever. We are diverting drug addicts into treatment where they belong. We are putting resources into

reentry programs and trying to work around federal bans on certain types of assistance so that former felons have a fighting chance to start over.

Now when you see one of these scarred men and women, I wouldn't expect you to look upon them until your compassion grows warm and tender, but I want you to know that that is how God is looking upon them—and us. And if, by the grace of God, we can begin to look at our own scarred selves in the same way, our judgments of others may look more like God's one day. Then we'll be ready when Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead. That is my earnest hope and prayer.

*http://www.mercurynews.com/opinion/ci_25771303/schools-v-prisons-educations-way-cut-prison-population

**<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324432004578304463789858002>

***http://www.americanbar.org/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/human_rights_vol37_2010/fall2010/justice_for_all_challenging_racial_disparities_criminal_justice_system.html