



(Image: Salem Evangelical Free Church)

Judgment – it’s all around us. A compulsion to determine the guilt or innocence of others – and too often to ignore our own guilt, failings or complicity in actions which denigrate others. Judgment in the world seems to mandate that we compare ourselves to others, in ways that ensure we come out on top. To make decisions about what is right and what is wrong as we want right and wrong to be, never mind any cultural differences or mitigating circumstances. To hold what we value up as the “right” way – and condemn those who don’t agree with us as wrong.

We certainly hear a lot about “our way and not your way” if you listen to the nightly news regarding what is happening (or not happening) in our political system. And, the fact that it made the nightly news and so the insults and vindictiveness between the two groups was repeated over and over- and many took pleasure in seeing how people could tear another down. Lines drawn in the sand in overt power plays – who gets to be king of the hill, regardless of who gets hurt along the way.

Judgment and violence are closely related. In a sermon by then Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, she said:

Violence is anything that seeks to diminish life – especially another person’s dignity or life possibilities. The word comes from the same root as vital, but it moves in the opposite direction, away from what God has created and called good and blessed. Violence misuses the gift of life, trading it for some dull or brassy idol that promises control, predictability or certainty. That brassy idol is simply a dressed up and tricked out phantasm of death. The life God has created is free to choose – and it can choose life or death. Violence seeks to steal that freedom or end it.¹

And yet, our Holy Scripture is full of instances where even God judges- remember the flood? Remember Sodom and Gomorrah? God got so fed up with humanity’s evilness that God flooded the whole world except for Noah and those in the ark. God got so fed up with those living in Sodom and Gomorrah that he threatened to destroy the whole town and everyone in it.

¹ See EFM Reading & Reflection Guide 2019-2020, Vol. C, pgs. 87-88.

Isaiah 11: 1-10; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19; Romans 15: 4-13; Matthew 3: 1-12

And then there is Abraham who begged God to reconsider – that if they found 50 men, then 40, then 30, then 20, then 10 – would God agree to spare the whole town. Can the few Godly men save the whole town? (And yes, the translation says “men” and not “men and women”).

Today’s Gospel gives us a pretty stark view of God’s judgment: His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Yikes! How do we avoid being chaff and burning up with unquenchable fire?

Another example is in the Gospel of Luke (16: 19-31) when we read about the rich man staring across the chasm from hell to see Lazarus – the poor man who laid by the gate to the city and the rich man just walked on past every day not even giving the scraps from his table to ease poor Lazarus’s hunger? That rich man begs Father Abraham to send dead Lazarus to the rich man’s brothers so their judgment and descent in hell would not result from being so oblivious to another’s need. And Jesus tells his audience that if the brothers would not pay attention to the prophets that they already have access to, then the brothers would not pay attention to someone returned from the dead with the message to judge not except with equity.

In this discussion about judgment vs. equity, Isaiah also gives us some ideas. It’s not judgment itself that is evil – it is judgment not tempered with those qualities that God evidences and values. It’s judgment that turns into violence. Jefferts Schori reminds us that:

Countering violence requires custody of the heart. Violence begins in the heart, especially in hearts that have been wounded and scarred by the violence of others, and then react and respond aggressively in overly defended ways. Violence begins in the heart that cannot countenance vulnerability – rooted in fear that its own vitality will be extinguished.

Countering violence begins in our hearts – with the words we choose, the judgments we make, and the vulnerability we’re willing to assume. Choices affect what or who has custody of the heart.²

What are the choice or the values that God wants to see in us? We get a clue from the prophets. Prophets abound in the Bible: from Amos and Hosea to John the Baptizer. A prophet was one who spoke the words given to him by God – the prophet could not not speak – he was compelled, even at the risk of his life, to speak the word of God. The purpose was to bring those who heard these words back into right relationship with God.

Micah, the prophet, asks us: What does God require of you? Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:9).

Isaiah, the prophet, tells us that when the spirit of the Lord rests upon you, you also have the spirit of wisdom

² Ibid.

Isaiah 11: 1-10; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19; Romans 15: 4-13; Matthew 3: 1-12

Of understanding. Of counsel and might. That one on whom the spirit of the Lord rests is one that judges with righteousness and equity.

Faithfulness is the belt surrounding us when we are centered in love of God.

Note that Isaiah mentions equity in the same segment as judgment. There is sometimes a difference between the two in a legal context. Judgment is a decision rendered in accordance with law- and law is built upon precedent or past court decisions and legislation enacted by Congress or its equivalent.

Equity can be something different. Equity seeks fairness even when that means the decision may not always be consistent with the law. While this is not a totally accurate analogy, if you think about recent complaints around “income inequality” there are some similarities. Those people advocating for a resolution to income inequality are asking for some fairness, some relationship in equity between pay for lowest paid and highest paid. I don’t believe they really are asking for everyone to be paid equally regardless of work function – but if so, then that isn’t equity.

Even God doesn’t ask for total parity between all persons. After all, Jesus tells us that to those to whom much is given much will be expected. And in Luke, chapter 6, verse 38, Jesus reminds us to: give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

Judgment. Equity. And then we come to John who baptized with water for repentance.

Repentance: meaning contrition and penitence for sins but coupled with turning towards new life with God as the focus.

This Advent season is a solemn season at the same time it looks forward both to the birth of Christ and the second coming of Christ. Advent is a “both/and” season for Christians.

The Jewish High Holy Days – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur- offer us a practice that fits within our understanding of Advent.

Rosh Hashanah is the start of the Jewish new year- clear parallels to Advent, which is the start of our church new year.

“In the Talmud it states that three books of account are opened on Rosh Hashanah, wherein the fate of the wicked, the righteous, and those of an intermediate class are recorded. The names of the righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life, and they are sealed "to live." The middle class are allowed a respite of ten days, until Yom Kippur, to repent and become righteous; the wicked are "blotted out of the book of the living forever.”

In Jewish liturgy Rosh Hashanah is described as "the day of judgment" (*Yom ha-Din*) and "the day of remembrance." Some descriptions depict God as sitting upon a throne, while books

Isaiah 11: 1-10; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19; Romans 15: 4-13; Matthew 3: 1-12

containing the deeds of all humanity are opened for review, and each person passing in front of Him for evaluation of his or her deeds.³

Starting with Rosh Hashanah, you begin a period of self-evaluation. The purpose is to call to mind anyone whom you have harmed – either overtly or by omission – during the past year and situations where a relationship has been breached. Then, to the extent possible, you contact that person and seek to repair the harm done.

Advent – awaiting the coming of the birth of Christ and also of the second coming and final judgment – offers us an opportunity to do much the same thing.

Take this period of four weeks to think about this last year.

Where have we spoken words in anger, frustration, haste? Where have we failed to speak?

Where have we acted in ways that do not hold up the other as a child loved by God?

Where have we judged disregarding wisdom, understanding or in ways that are not faithful to the Word of God?

These few days can be a time, for each of us, to look back on our year and seek to make amends. So that, when Christmas Day arrives, we are in love and charity with our neighbor.

Mitch Albom recounts the story, in his book, Have a Little Faith, of a man standing at the gravesite of his wife.

The man is speaking to his rabbi, with tears streaming down his face.

I loved her, he says.

I know, says the rabbi.

No, I really loved her, the man says.

I know, says the rabbi.

And the man replies, I almost told her one time.

This Advent season, my hope is that you will not let the unsaid words be your regret. Mend those fences. Speak the words that will heal the broken places. Come to Christmas Day having made your peace with those in your life you love. And, find ways to tell those you love that you love them. Know that God loved you first and thus gives us the example of what we are called to do.

Seek justice. Love mercy. Promote equity when judgment is too narrow and would cast down rather than lift up. God will always bring forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse if we will open our eyes and our hearts to the wonder, the power and the love that is ours if we will accept the gracious gift of God Almighty. **Amen.**

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosh_Hashanah (December 4, 2010)