

## Caught Between Mercy and Judgment – Brian Hartley

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

One of my favorite theologians, the indomitable Yogi Berra, is purported to have once said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” For those of us who have confronted difficult decisions in our lives, we’d love to be able to comply so easily. Unfortunately, making choices is usually not quite so simple—rarely is one choice clearly good and the other equally bad. More typically, we find ourselves struggling to make sense of the morass that we call life and hoping simply to choose the lesser of two evils.

But unlike such moral quandaries, today’s scriptures hit us upside the face with severe, somewhat startling contrasts and force us to confront our own propensity to sin. Throughout all of these texts there is a kind of bleakness sometimes (though not always) tempered by the possibility of grace. In a culture predicated on “the pursuit of happiness” where we tend to wander around in a solipsistic stupor, rediscovering these violent images of devastation and corruptibility can be, in the words of Valley Girl speak, “like, a real downer.” This morning we find ourselves literally caught, then, between these themes of mercy and judgment and are forced to reevaluate our lives in light of the gospel in order to answer what we are going to do about this ugly fork in the road.

The context for our opening passage of devastation is the impending destruction of Jerusalem and all of Judah from the north sometime after the year 605 B.C.E. A series of poems follow one after the other throughout chapters 4 and 5 of Jeremiah and, collectively, provide a sense of impending terror and doom as the small kingdom contemplates its future in light of the superpower of its age—none other than the fabled whore of Babylon. The picture portrayed here is one of **apocalyptic devastation**. In his poignant commentary on this passage, Robert Carroll points out that the prophet is resurrecting the language of the opening chapter of Genesis where the earth is described as “formless and void.” That same line (tohu wabohu) gets repeated here, only this is not a pre- but a post-civilization portrait. Carroll says that “the images are drawn from a war-torn or earthquake-shattered landscape where the most noticeable feature is the absence of humans and birds. Civilization is also absent: the cultivated or fertile land has returned to wilderness, the constructed cities in ruins. Culture and people were once here but not any longer. Yahweh’s fierce anger has swept everything away,” (Jeremiah: A Commentary, 169).

The closest parallel which comes immediately to mind is the destruction of downtown New York on that awful day nine years ago this week when the twin towers fell. Even today, it remains difficult for those of us who sat frozen in front of our television screens to get our minds around the immensity of damage done to the south end of Manhattan. For much of the last nine years the site has remained something of a massive crater going down several stories into the earth.

But, in the days immediately after the event, as the emergency workers scrambled over the piles of debris it looked like something from the pits of hell. A few survivors, very few, were pulled from the rubble and as they waited for rescue perhaps they could identify with the lines from Siegfried Sassoon's poem, "Break of Day," written from the Somme battlefield in those ugly days of the Great War:

"Was it the ghost of autumn in that smell  
Of underground, or God's blank heart grown kind,  
That sent a happy dream to him in hell?—  
Where men are crushed like clods, and crawl to find  
Some crater for their wretchedness; who lie  
In outcast immolation, doomed to die  
Far from clean things or any hope of cheer,  
Cowed anger in their eyes, till darkness brims  
And roars into their heads, and they can hear  
Old childish talk, and tags of foolish hymns."

Likewise, Jeremiah's portrait where "the whole land shall be a desolation" and "the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black," calls to remembrance scenes of absolute devastation which occurred all too often over the last century or so of western civilization. The graphic depiction in this prophetic text speaks of the very cosmos draped in the weeds of mourning. In her wonderful piece of social history, *The Great Silence*, the British historian, Juliet Nicholson, describes this kind of death pall in nationalistic terms in the two years that followed the armistice that ended World War I. Because hundreds of thousands never came home for burial, people flocked to battlefields which remained filled with churned-up mud and exposed body parts. The macabre scene and the putrid stench which remained for years after served not as a means of solace for many but of heart-rending horror for war brides and desolate mothers. Returning home, they were met by thousands more of the walking wounded who hopped or crawled about with missing limbs oftentimes begging on the streets with blank stares. To those raised in the era of the imperialistic glories of Victorian England just a few decades before, such scenes probably seemed like a cruel joke of the Almighty. In many cases we now know that these veterans were some of the earliest victims of post-traumatic stress syndrome and would live the rest of their lives reliving the horrors of that war.

But today's scriptures do not leave us at the gates of Mordor but, in the words of the writer of 1 Timothy, beckon us on from judgment and desolation to the land of mercy. This mercy, Paul suggests, was not based on either his character or his actions. In fact, he describes himself here as "formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence," (1 Timothy 1:13). Twice in a few short verses the author reminds his hearers that he is the unwitting recipient of God's mercy in Christ so that he might be made an example to others of the depths of God's grace.

Now, I remember as perhaps many of you do, learning that grace is "God's unmerited favor." But it was reading Frederick Buechner that really provided greater insight into that concept. He

says that “grace is something you never get but can only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever tried to love somebody? A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There’s nothing you have to do. There’s nothing you have to do. There’s nothing you have to do,” (*Wishful Thinking*, 33-34).

And it is just that sense of grace which seems to pervade the entire 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. Here Jesus summons up his storytelling skills to tell three different but interrelated narratives of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. While it is only the first two of these three stories that we have in our lectionary reading for today it is important to remember that they all follow in quick succession upon one another. Each of them is similar in that they begin with a tremendous sense of loss and end with a celebrative explosion of joy. And, anyone who has ever lost anything of significance can surely identify with them—whether a lost set of keys, a lost collection of pictures, or maybe even something larger like a job or a home. The emotional swing from the pits of despair to the joy of reclaiming one’s possession or sense of worth can be almost overpowering.

But at the center of each of these stories is the care shown by the one who is seeking for that which is lost and the risk that each one takes. In the case of the shepherd, he literally is seen leaving behind the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness at great risk to himself and to them in order to go in search of the one. Or, in the case of the prodigal son, it is the father who, at great risk to both himself and his sons, gives away their entire inheritance before entrusting them with this great material wealth. The lavish love that he demonstrates and the way that he trusts his sons bespeaks an attitude towards property and goods that would have struck Jesus’ hearers as, at best, unwise and, at worst, downright stupid and profligate. I am sure that they must have been listening for Jesus to pronounce words of judgment on the father rather than words of mercy on the son.

And this is just where I think the most interesting part of the narrative, one that oftentimes gets overlooked, comes into play. For it is the framework of this fifteenth chapter which may well provide the key to understanding how Jesus is intending the stories to be heard. For, in the opening verses the narrator is carefully contrasting two groups of people. On the one hand, we are told, are “all the tax collectors and sinners,” while on the other are “the Pharisees and the scribes.” And, of the former he tells us, “they were coming near to listen to him,” while of the latter group he almost mutters under his breath, “they were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” The juxtaposition here could not be more stark nor, to a first-century Jewish audience, more startling. In their world to be labeled tax collector or sinner was to find one’s self at the bottom of the social scale while to be called Pharisee or scribe meant to be given an honorific which would be applied to those considered to be of the highest social ranking.

So, when Jesus says in verse ten at the end of our gospel lesson, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents,” he is inverting the priorities of the status quo and the way they would have conceived of rank order in society. Jesus’ words were clearly meant for the ears of both groups of people and would have created an overwhelming sense of relief and joy for the one while provoking anger and hostility for the other. Which brings us back around to that bothersome fork in the road...

For you see, each and every day we are confronted with a similar set of choices—whether to “come near and listen” to Jesus or whether to grumble and complain about the other wretched blokes included in God’s Kingdom. I have discovered in my own life that I am oftentimes tempted to mouth the words of Tommy Smothers to his brother, Dick: “Mom always liked you best!” whether it comes to my own family or to the organizations of which I am a part. In this respect, it is easy for me to slip into the role of the older brother who labored away for the good of his father and expected moral judgment to be cast on other siblings who insisted on coloring outside the lines. But doing so means confining one’s self to the land of judgment rather than the land of mercy and, while I might desire judgment for others I would always prefer mercy for myself.

Yesterday, on the anniversary of the suicide hijackings of 9/11, Florida pastor, Terry Jones, was tempted to think that the best way to respond was to call the Christian community to exercise judgment by burning copies of the Koran. In many ways, the pastor had the law on his side. The exercise of freedom of expression is burned into the American constitutional conscience. Roger Cohen, writing Thursday in the New York Times, sees the pastor’s challenge to be but the tip of a larger iceberg of national hatred that has been brewing in our society over the last decade and has reached a new zenith with high unemployment paralleled with bailed-out corporate fat-cats on one side of the street with wounded and battle-scarred Iraq and Afganistan war veterans lining the ditch on the other side. “None of this fosters forgiveness,” claims Cohen. “Rather, it feeds a quest for scapegoats — Wall Street or Wahhabis.”

But when one reads the story of Jesus who himself was the victim of cruel injustice and horrific violence, it is hard to reconcile the pastor’s actions or our collective social and racial hatred with the gospel story. And while we might be rather self-righteous and proclaim ourselves above such petty and ill-advised provocation, perhaps the pastor’s approach is not so very different than what we have wished upon others when we feel ourselves misjudged and relegated to the margins of life. When such occasions do arise, perhaps we should take a look at that fork stuck in the road between mercy and judgment and ask ourselves whether we wish to remain grumblers and complainers or to move in closer to Jesus. Though doing the former may provide some brief relief and self-justification, doing the latter is what becoming a Christian and living into our baptism is really all about.

In contradistinction to the approach of Pastor Jones, we might consider the actions of a teacher and pastor to a ten-year-old lad, one Tony Blair, who would one day be Prime Minister of England. In his recent memoir, *A Journey: My Political Life*, Mr. Blair tells the story of this

unnamed educator who met him at the door to his classroom early on the morning when his forty-year-old father suffered a severe stroke and was rushed to hospital. When the sympathetic teacher suggested to the frightened and bewildered boy that they kneel and pray for his father's recovery, young Tony plucked up the courage to whisper, "I'm afraid my father doesn't believe in God." Undaunted, the teacher's reply would forever remain seared in the future leader's memory—"That doesn't matter," the older man said. "God believes in him. He loves him without demanding or needing love in return." Almost fifty years later, now, with his elderly father still alive, Blair claims that that conversation with his teacher who demonstrated both wisdom and mercy, rather than snobbery and judgment, is why he remains a Christian and believes in the power of unconditional love.

The clear calling in today's gospel lesson is to avoid the jealousy and anger of those who insist on sitting in judgment and to acknowledge our own culpability and open ourselves up to being surprised, once again, by the majesty of God's grace. So, as we continue with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem here in the Gospel according to St. Luke throughout the next few months of ordinary time, let us keep our eyes firmly focused on the goal ahead and never forget to model our actions on the self-same one who set his face to go up to Jerusalem—even death on a cross.