

“The Quick and the Dead”

Luke 3.15–17 & 21–22

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 10 Jan 2010

Judgment is a difficult concept for us in the progressive end of the Protestant spectrum. I suspect that this is in part because we consider ourselves to be accepting of people, and we project this cultural value on to our concept of God. And it part because we see the tremendously tragic human consequences of the judgment of religious zealots and fundamentalists – whether they are gay-bashing Christians, Muslim terrorists, or ultraorthodox Jews who think that the Middle East is theirs alone.

And yet judgment is a major theme in Christianity, even if it is one that most of us shy away from. This morning, I’m not going to avoid the issue any longer, thanks to our old friend and locust-eater, John the Baptizer.

I’m going to quibble a bit with the faceless, nameless gnomes¹ who developed the Revised Common Lectionary, who summarily broke up the beginning of the third chapter of Luke’s gospel, which tell us about John. The chapter moves us from the bit we heard in Advent foretelling the ministry of Jesus by quoting Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’” And then it continues this way, and we really get to know John, who is no namby-pamby, watered-down prophet:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor;’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’ And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’”²

Without hearing that part of this chapter, the rest doesn’t quite make sense, and John’s winnowing-fork metaphor is obscure at best. John is determined that Jesus is the one who will separate the wheat from the chaff...and it isn’t going to be pretty.

John the Baptizer is emphatic about the role of the messiah as a prophet of judgment. George Caird, who was a pre-eminent British New Testament scholar, a Congregationalist, and Marcus Borg’s dissertation advisor at Oxford, has this to say: “Luke...might see John as the harbinger of a world-wide salvation, but John’s own vision of the future was one of the world-wide and imminent judgement. He saw the woodsman ready to raise is axe for the first stroke, the farmer with the winnowing shovel in hand striding toward the threshing floor. A mightier [one] than he was coming, in whose service the most menial of household duties would be for him a privilege. John was an austere man with a religion of high moral earnestness, and he could not conceive of greatness except in terms of severity excelling his own. The coming crisis would see the mighty overthrow of ancient wrong, the settling of accounts on the basis of strict judgement.”³

¹ actually the Consultation on Common Texts

² Luke 3.7–14

³ G. B. Caird, *Saint Luke*. (London: Penguin, 1963), pp.72-73.

John is something like we are, isn't he? We want to see the bad guys get punished and the virtuous rewarded. That's human nature. And it is integral to the Hebrew prophetic tradition that includes both John and Jesus. Listen to eighth chapter of Amos: "The end has come upon my people Israel... The songs of the Temple shall become wailings in that day," says the Lord. "The dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent. Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring ruin to the poor of the land."

Of course, John's sermon in Luke's gospel is not the only place in the New Testament where judgment plays a key role, though judgment is not so prevalent in Mark's and Luke's accounts, and it is more so in Matthew's and John's.⁴ Still, the idea of Jesus as judge gets a lot less actual text in the New Testament than you might imagine.

That being the case, why is judgment so heavily emphasized in the Christian tradition over the millennia? How did the idea of a final judgment work its way so deeply into our tradition?

Turning to the creeds of the fourth century, both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, we see a central place for the idea that Jesus is going to pass judgment both in this life and after it. Both creeds say that "he will come to judge the living and the dead." (I've always like the translation used in the old Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*: "he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.")

The church in the fourth century was in a state of radical flux, moving from a persecuted and outlawed cult to the official religion of the Roman Empire. And what better way to let people know "who wears the pants in the family" than to emphasize that judgment – ultimate judgment – is in their bailiwick. I don't want to be too skeptical: this also means that Caesar's judgment is not the final word. But emphasizing judgment does centralize a lot of power in the church's priesthood and hierarchy.

I have seen a fair number of former Roman Catholics who have found their way into the UCC (and others who will never darken the doorstep of any church) who still carry the baggage of being judged for all eternity, perhaps still a little concerned on a deep, unspoken level that if they don't receive last rites from a Roman priest that the jury may be out ... or that it may come in the wrong way. And it isn't just Catholics. Plenty of Protestants have been badgered into thinking that if they don't observe certain forms of piety and morality and if they don't hold "the right" opinions about God and Jesus that they will be judged unworthy and will burn eternally in Hell.

But what if judgment is *not* an entry-ticket into heaven, but rather a guide to life? What if the life and teachings of Jesus are the rule – the measure and standard – of human existence. What if the judgment of Christ is an ongoing metric of how well we follow his example and bring his teachings to life, rather than how pious we are?

Judgment is also in the UCC Statement of Faith: "You judge people and nations by your righteous will, declared through prophets and apostles."

What if judgment is not at the eschaton – the final days – but rather a one-day-at-a-time objective that we are drawn toward, because it is life-giving?



In the preaching of John, we hear the Baptizer to tell people to share their food and clothing, warn tax collectors to take no more than the prescribed amount, and tell occupying Roman soldiers not to extort money from people. Is that judgmental or using good judgment?

⁴ see Mt. 25.31 ff. and Jn. 5.25 ff.

The instances each have to do with observing economic justice and treating the poor fairly. Is isn't about how pious you've been or if a priest has performed the correct rite with you, but how compassionate and fair you have been with the power entrusted to you.

Now, let's turn to the preaching of Jesus. The Sermon on the Plain (Luke's version of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount) offers some warnings:

"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have had your consolation.

"Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep."⁵

Those sound like prophetic warnings. But the only reference to judgment in this sermon is this: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you."⁶

When Jesus says, "Do not judge," does it imply that we are not supposed to decide what to have for dinner or whether a concept makes sense to us or whether to step in an oppose and injustice? Of course not. If we never made that type of judgment, we'd be paralyzed. Perhaps it makes more sense if we heard, "Do not pass judgment" on someone or "don't be judgmental," rather than the vague, "Do not judge."

There is a difference between "passing judgment" or "being judgmental" and *using judgment*. The Venerable Dogo Graham, a Zen Buddhist abbot, writes, "To be judgmental is to put someone down, belittle them, see yourself as superior to them. But that's not the same thing as making a reasoned, qualitative judgment about a situation or a type of behavior. For example, I would contend that it is better to offer assistance and respect to homeless people than to spit on them, and that a person doing the latter is behaving reprehensibly. By the logic of a Barnes & Noble Buddhist, though, I'm 'being judgmental' – because I'm making a judgment. This view combines intellectual laziness with moral cowardice, and is the quintessence of what Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche called 'idiot compassion' – a superficial egalitarianism that is not compassionate at all."⁷



Jesus and John stand as an interesting contrast to one another. Going back to this morning's text, John seems to be full of condemnation and Jesus is totally silent. John is baptizing people not as a rite of entry into a new faith, but as a rite of purification of sin within Judaism. And Jesus' act of allowing John to baptize him speaks volumes about his own humility.

Judgment still may be a difficult concept for us, in terms of a final reckoning that will admit us to one form of afterlife or another. But we can accept with humility is that we don't have to worry about making such judgments. It isn't in the control of any priest or imam or rabbi or minister. It's in God's hands, not ours.

Jesus' parables offer examples like a sheep that was lost...and found; a spendthrift son who blew his inheritance only to be welcomed back home by a loving father. What does that tell you about God's judgment?

⁵ Lk. 6.24–25

⁶ Lk. 6.37–38

⁷ "On Making Judgments" by The Ven. Dogo Graham at <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=8,7194,0,0,1,0>

All we can do is our best. That doesn't mean that any of us is perfect...it means that we need to be assiduous in seeking to live lives modeled on Jesus...the one whom we know as the Christ.

Amen.