

will come pouring out: ‘What about Hitler?’ ‘What about child molesters?’ ‘What about my skunk of a brother-in-law?’ Their one pressing worry is always, ‘What have you done with the hell we know and love?’”⁵ We are glad for the grace for ourselves. It can be hard to believe that God intends that *grace for all*.

But people often looked at Jesus and Paul with utter disbelief and serious doubts about their sanctity, too, when they spoke of God’s grace and forgiveness. And yet they persisted in their message that the judgment of grace is a free gift. It is a wonderful gift that changes everything. And yet, it does not excuse bad behavior or terrible sin. It’s not the same as a free pass for everybody. How we act in our bodies and minds and what we say with our mouths still matters. What matters is how we respond to the grace that has already been offered to us. That grace is at work, right now, putting to death those forces in and among us that steal life, that prevent humanity and creation from flourishing. Christ died for all so that those who live (that’s us!) might live no longer *for themselves*, but *for him* who died and was raised for them. What counts is how we live *in response to the grace*. The judgment Paul speaks of judges who among us is trying to accept with gratitude the grace God has already offered.⁶ The grace is already ours, regardless. What counts is how we live *for Christ*, which means living *for others*.

When the judge in Virginia offered a sentence of reading and learning about serious issues, rather than something punitive, grace was wrapped up in it. That ruling, secular as it was, recognized that the students were not bad at their core. Rather, they had not yet been invited to see and accept the grace God had already offered them. They had not yet died to some of the things in life that tear us apart, that cause pain and suffering. But when they were awakened to that invitation to grace already surrounding them, some of them at least, took it. They saw the old things of their lives pass away. They were able to see everything, including themselves, become new. What more could any of us ask for?

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God.

1 Douglas Broom, “A US judge sentenced teenage vandals to read books. This is what happened next,” *World Economic Forum*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/this-is-what-happened-when-a-us-judge-sentenced-teenage-vandals-to-read-books/>

2 Guy Nave, “2 Corinthians,” in Brian K. Blount, et al., eds. *True to our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 316.

3 Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 353.

4 Capon, 355.

5 Capon, 350-351.

6 Capon, 356.

June 16, 2024

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
“*Judgement That Looks Like Grace*”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:6-17

Today, we’re going to talk about judgment. But do not panic—this is good news, I promise! The scripture says, “for all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” Some of you probably grew up hearing a preacher speak again and again about God’s judgment. Some of you may be in *this* church specifically because you hope to hear sermons about grace and love; *not* judgment. Some of us, during this Pride month, are reminded that judgment is still a common thing in our society, with one group of people happy to pass judgment on other groups. And we must remember that that passing of judgment goes in many directions.

A few years ago in northern Virginia, a group of five teenage boys, aged 16 and 17, sprayed graffiti on a historic 19th century black schoolhouse in their town. They painted swastikas and racially charged phrases on the building. They were caught and tried. The prosecutor looked into the boys’ records; they’d never been in trouble before. Two of them were white and three were people of color. She wondered if maybe they had no real understanding of what they had done or the meaning behind it. So the prosecutor convinced the judge not to sentence the boys to probation or juvenile hall, or even community service. But instead, to have them read some books. The assigned reading list included books like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Night*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and *The Crucible*—books from many periods of history that describe, among other things, the horrors of the Holocaust, the violence of the slave trade and the Jim Crow south, and the hysteria and brutality of religious persecution. The boys were also asked to visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., not too far from their homes.

Some people were outraged by the sentence from the judge. They thought this was a light consequence, one that black teens and some others would never be so lucky to receive. One poet whose work about Emmett Till appeared on the reading list said, “Will kids punished by being made to read poetry ever read poetry again?”¹

Maybe that’s fair criticism of this judgment. I think we also know that ‘typical sentences’ may punish wrongdoing, but on the whole, they rarely transform. In this case, the prosecutor’s hope was simply that the boys might learn something

about tolerance. After the experience, they each wrote an essay about what they'd read and learned. One student acknowledged that, when he painted the graffiti, he didn't know what a swastika meant; he thought it didn't really mean much at all. "Not anymore," he wrote. He now knows that it is a symbol of pain, torture, and hate. He went on, "I had no idea about how in depth the darkest parts of human history go...Everybody should be treated with equality, no matter their race, religion, sex or orientation. I will do my best to see to it that I never am this ignorant again."

This judge offered a judgment that didn't look anything like what people expected. Those who expected a *punishment* were disappointed. But for anyone hoping for a new life for the students, dare we say a *resurrection* of their lives, maybe this kind of judgment was exactly the right one.

We have a complicated relationship with the concept of judgment, especially God's judgment. Many religious traditions have used this idea as a weapon and some people have experienced real harm because of it. That's along the lines of billboards that scream that we better get our lives in order or we'll be sorry. Though, when it comes to *other people* being judged for things they've done, many of us may be at peace with that. Do the crime, do the time, right?! On the other hand, judgment can function not as a symbol of retribution, but as a sign of hope for people who are oppressed, as it was for many enslaved people in the Americas. Many of them believed that God would one day judge those who were hurting them, and that God's promised justice would finally come. Judgment was a promise of freedom and a way to know that their present reality was not the final reality.²

However, when it comes to the idea of being judged *ourselves*, we may feel more hesitation or fear. Even when we generally live good lives, there are always things we are not proud of; things that we're mixed up in just by being human. Paul said that even people of faith could expect to be judged for their actions: "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." He offers this simply as the truth of what will be, neither as a threat nor as something hopeful. But we know that Paul's larger message was that "we are saved by grace through faith." We don't earn anything that God gives us. So, what can we make of this idea of judgment? How should we feel when we hear about it?

Well, it turns out that Jesus gave advice about how to understand God's judgment too. Many of the parables he told had themes about judgment. And he especially told those parables leading right up to his own death and resurrection. Robert Farrar Capon is an Episcopal priest, theologian, and also a food writer and chef, and he is one of the most delightful commentators to read. His understanding of the cross, the empty tomb, and God's judgment will be our guide for understanding Paul today. Capon is clear that the "fairest and most natural reading of [God's judgment], therefore, will always be one that

makes death and resurrection the principal clue to what Jesus is talking about."³

On the cross, Jesus shows us what is most important in the face of wrong. What's important is fighting back with brutality, not grand actions and words; not getting even or getting mad. Rather, God does something miraculous through *inaction*. Through submission. Through death. As Capon says, "the judgment is precisely one of forgiveness, of a saving grace that works by death and resurrection." This is what Paul says, too, in his letter: "we are convinced that one has died for all."

We live under grace. Grace is what happens in the first place, by the power of Jesus' passion on the cross; his death and resurrection. This is the verse from scripture that we say at the baptismal font: "we love, because God first loved us." It's also at that font where we are called to join Jesus in his death. Paul again says: "We are convinced that one has died for all; *therefore all have died*." Those who do baptism by immersion make that symbolism most clear: we die with Christ when we go down under the water, and we rise with him when we come back up.

But what does that mean? What does it mean to die with Christ? What is God putting to death at the font and in our lives? Lots of things, really. God is putting to death our selfishness and self-centeredness; our inability to see from other people's viewpoints. God is putting to death the ugliness and misunderstanding that led those boys to paint a swastika on a black schoolhouse. God is putting to death in us a hunger for power and prestige; a desire for security for ourselves along with our carelessness about the common good. What dies with Christ at the font is looking at each other from a human point of view, rather than from Christ's point of view. In that dying, we enter into God's grace; we enter into a new way of seeing and being. In Christ, we become a new creation. The old stuff of life is gone, dead, done and dusted. See, everything has become new.

The student who read the books and learned how the past affects the present—the old things were gone in him, put to death. He had become something new. And if this transformation in Christ is true, then, as Capon writes, "Jesus must not be read as having baited us with grace only to clobber us in the end with the law. For as the death and resurrection of Jesus were accomplished once and for all, so the grace that reigns by those mysteries reigns eternally—even in the thick of judgment."⁴

With Christ, the judgment is grace. The grace is the judgment, thanks be to God! We do not need to live in fear. We can live in hope, not just for ourselves, but all for all people, who may be transformed and made new. Sometimes it's hard to believe this good news. Capon reminds us saying, "As a preacher, I can with the greatest of ease tell people God is going to get them, and I can be sure they will believe every word I say. But what I cannot do, without inviting utter disbelief and serious doubts about my sanity, is proclaim that [God] has in fact taken away *all* the sins of the world and that [God] has, accordingly, solved all the problems [God] once had with sin... Because if I do, the same old questions