
Judgment and the Kingdom of Heaven

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 10 – Year A

I know, you all woke up this morning wondering, what is the kingdom of heaven like? And you came to church today, hoping that's what we would be talking about. Well, you're in luck! Because this is the very thing that Jesus has on his mind, too, in our Gospel.

But you know how he is. He likes to address complicated questions with parables, which are anything but straightforward. And that's how he tackles our question, too: with parables, a series of them, really—perhaps to protect us from oversimplifying the matter.

The kingdom of heaven, he says, is like a mustard seed, yeast, a hidden treasure, a fishing net, a merchant searching for pearls, or, in our gospel today, like someone who sowed good seed in a field, but an enemy came along behind him and mixed in bad seed in, too—seed for a plant called darnel, actually, that looks a lot like wheat, except that instead of bearing life-sustaining grains, it yields toxic seeds. When the servants suspect that these two plants are growing together in the same field, they want to do something about it—to fix the field, by pulling out the undesirable plants. The master says no, because they might destroy the wheat too. At harvest time, he assures them, the reapers will sort it all out.

Now, for a long time, I read this as a lesson about judgment—the hellfire-and-brimstone kind that sends a holy and pure few to a place called heaven and condemns the rest to hell. Indeed, Matthew himself offers an interpretation of this sort, as if to give his audience an idea of how the parable could apply to their time and place and concerns. But that is just one interpretation of many!

Then, I went to the other extreme, zeroing in on the good sower's tolerance of good and bad seed, and concluding that the message was, "Don't judge, at all." Which came as a relief, at a time when I preferred the path of moral relativism and really didn't want the responsibility of judging anyway.

Today, in good Anglican fashion, I've settled somewhere in the middle. I don't think that Jesus is telling us not to judge at all. In fact, if wheat and darnel are growing in the same field together, and look so much alike, we have to be even *more* discerning! *We have* to judge, in the sense of distinguishing right from wrong, renouncing evil, and defending truth and justice. But we are to judge with care and humility and a readiness to confess and repent when we're wrong. Because, after all, God is God, and we are not; and God is the ultimate judge, over all of us.

Still, people can be so arrogant and cruel and unrelenting in their judgments of one another—judgments that may be used, in turn, to justify separation, segregation, discrimination.

Take Deborah (not her real name), mother of four, theology student, and leader in an Episcopal worshipping community, who's serving a life sentence for a crime she committed 26 years ago, at the age of 22. She's changed a lot over the years, and has become a mentor and mother-figure to many of the younger or newer women at the prison.

When she came up for parole a few years ago, she was denied because of "the nature of her crime." I remember her despair afterwards, and I remember her words, "The nature of my crime will never change. No matter what I do, the nature of my

crime will never change.” She came up for parole again just a few weeks ago, and was denied, again; and so here she is, again, picking herself and her hope and faith back up off the ground. And I’m discouraged, too, and wondering, how *do* you keep hoping, and trying, and growing, when time after time, you’re told that all you are is that tragic mistake you made?

Then there are all the people who’ve served their time and been released, yet the punishment and exile continue, because no matter what they do, they carry the stigma—the label of a “felon”—which somehow legitimates denying them housing, employment, social benefits, trust, another chance.

These are personal examples for me, but I realize they may be controversial. So I want to be clear: we *do* have a responsibility to judge—to hold the guilty accountable, to the degree we’re able; and that’s what the criminal justice system is charged with doing, and there are a lot of very good people doing very good work in that system. What I’m finding so problematic and painful is the way it can be so reluctant to recognize change, rehabilitation, or restoration.

This system doesn’t operate in a vacuum. It’s part of a wider culture, and a reflection of that culture’s fears and desire for purity and certainty and security. As a culture, and as individuals, we do have a tendency to freeze one another in the moment of a mistake or offense, don’t we? To fix people, permanently, in categories, like “undesirable.”

It happens all over the place: in the media, in our families, neighborhoods, schools. Schools can be the worst, with the unforgiving way that kids judge one another and impose their own sentence of social exile; or with the way that a young person can be burdened with a label or reputation that sticks, for years, no matter how they’ve outgrown it, or never deserved it in the first place.

So what on earth does this have to do with the kingdom of heaven? Well, for me, today, at least, it suggests that it has less to do with hellfire-and-brimstone judgment, and more to do with the good sower’s desire for an abundant harvest, and for all of us to grow and bear fruit. Which is a different kind of judgment, the judgment of the Lord who “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

So, perhaps, may we be, too: gracious and merciful, slow to anger or condemn or separate, and abounding in steadfast love. And, remembering that we are *not* God, may we also be cautious and humble in judgment, too, and willing to change—both our minds and ourselves. And may we give that same liberty to others and allow others to change, too. And may we never give up on the possibility of redemption and reconciliation.