

Our UCC Faith: God Loves, Pushes (and Judges?)
The Monroe Congregational Church
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
August 20, 2017

Micah 6:6-8; Psalm 130; Matthew 25:31-40

Today is the fifth sermon in a summer preaching series on the theological statements contained within the United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith: *"You judge people and nations by your righteous will, declared through prophets and apostles."*

Last March a group of friends and I were on our way to meet with the leaders of a Bedouin tribe in the region between Jerusalem and Jericho when we encountered a group of a dozen elementary school aged children.

They were on their way to school, walking the two kilometers to the next village, following barely perceptible paths woven into sand dunes over time. One of the smallest students carried a box almost as big as she was, or should I say, almost as big as the grin on her face.

"What do you have there?" My friend Firas translated into Arabic *"madha ladayk hunak?"* The girl's smile erupted into giggles as she showed us a tiny off-white baby animal in a box. "Is it a sheep or goat?" I asked. The students all thought my question was hilarious for some reason... and I never did discover the truth!

If you looked at the herd the animal came from, you might also be unable to tell. To be honest, they look awfully similar. Goat or sheep? Sheep or goat? Both have shaggy coats, they behave about the same, and are about the same size.

Today's parable features a shepherd that would separate the two. The time to repent and be converted, the time to care for the poor on one's doorstep, is past. Judgment has arrived.

What makes some blessed is that in seeing the poor and helping them, they saw and helped Jesus – even without being aware of it. By contrast, what makes others cursed is that they never really did see Jesus suffering and in need because they never really saw the suffering people before them.

Paradoxically, blessedness seems to come from active compassion toward those whom the rest of society has judged. The kingdom of heaven shows up where we least expect it. The presence of Jesus is hidden in the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and imprisoned.

Most of us are not very good at being a judge – although, we certainly have been trying a lot lately! To be a judge, one must be impartial. In order to be fair, one’s judgement must be neither too harsh nor too lax.

Sometimes we judge by appearances. I have a friend who encounters this every time she takes her children out for back to school shopping. Her eldest daughter and son tend to get all kinds of assistance from those in the store. But her youngest two girls, adopted from Ethiopia ten years ago, are often followed by store security.

Raising a mixed-race family has brought about some awkward questions over the years. She remembers being asked whether or not she planned to straighten the girl’s hair so that they would fit in better in their mostly-white hometown. Strangely no one ever said anything about her white daughter’s purple hair. Maybe her youngest two would be tall, was she going to enroll them in basketball camp?

The hardest ones were those that questioned their intentions – what was she trying to prove? Did she know there were struggling children in the United States who were ready for adoption? Some might even “fit in” with her family a little better.

From the moment she and her husband laid eyes on those girls, they were a family. They persevered then, as they still do. They encourage their girls to stay connected to their Ethiopian culture through participating in special events with the entire family. And while it hasn’t been easy, they have consistently stood up for their children, despite the occasional judgement.

We are human, and sometimes we make assumptions about the depths of others' feelings and experiences that are not ours to make. We need a better, wiser judge than ourselves.

For some reason, Jesus’ disciples feared this kind of judgement. Which is pretty surprising, after all, since they had been with Jesus long enough to hear him teach again and again about love and forgiveness. They had given up everything: home, job, family just to follow him.

The disciples had even been promised to reign with him in the life to come. After all of that, how could they possibly be afraid?

Earlier they were in the temple and pointed out to Jesus the huge stones at the base and heard him say “Not one will be left on top of another.” Later that night when they were alone with Jesus, they asked him about this future time of judgement and he told them about the persecutions they would all go through. How they were to be arrested and put into prison.

They knew a little bit about the conditions in a Roman prison. Prisoners received nothing but moldy bread and tepid water to sustain them. If the weather turned cold, the stones in the wall turned damp. Their jailers wouldn't offer extra clothes or a comforting warm blanket. And if any of them got sick and died from being too cold and hungry, well, no one in authority gave a damn.

Imagine yourself in their sandals, slowly walking up to a Roman prison with a basket of food and warm clothes. You ask the guard if you could give the basket to your suffering friends inside. Would you be scared? It would take an amazing amount of faith and love to do such a thing.

There was nothing in it for those who were so generous. Their only thought was for how much their fellow believers were struggling. Their only regret was they weren't able to do more.

In spite of saintly actions like these, those who followed Jesus still tended to feel unworthy. Sometimes growing in faith and love does that to a person. It makes us more aware of all those little sins of thought, word, and action.

So they wondered... with an increased awareness of their past behavior, and armed with Jesus' description of how true faith shows itself, would the disciples measure up when Judgment Day comes?

Will we? That's been the burning question on my mind this past week.

We're all learning more in the news about white nationalists, neo-Nazi's, Klan members and the like who really believe they are being persecuted, replaced. They see this country changing color, and that is the worst heresy they can imagine. So much fear. So much hate.

What white supremacists don't understand is that from the start, from the very beginning, God places diversity at the heart of Creation.

Light and dark, day and night, land and sea, bird and fish, animal and humankind, man and woman: all part of the great panoply of life, all different, and all loved into existence, and all called "good."

My confederate flag-waving Uncle Joe in Florida does not see it that way. He believes that all kinds of people who don't look like or think like him or pray like him need to go back to where they came from. Uncle Joe hides behind a keyboard and says hateful and violent things online about entire groups of people that members of his own family belong to.

Based on what Jesus taught, our future Day of Judgment will be a pretty simple one. And it'll be one that my uncle Joe will flunk if he doesn't change soon, because it will be centered on one important question: "*How well did you love your neighbor?*" I don't know why he has chosen to be so angry and bitter and live in such fear, and it breaks my heart.

There are those who believe we are engaged in a battle for our nation's very soul. Let's have some honest, respectful and productive discussions about what that soul contains and about the policies that support it. You know that there are many ways to be hungry, in addition to empty bellies.

The recent turmoil in Charlottesville shines a spotlight on a deeper set of questions for those who follow Jesus:

How do we address problems like racism and its ugly cousin, fascism?

Are we a people of fear or a people of hope?

Are we a people of war or a people of peace?

Are we a people of hate or a people of love?

The parable of the sheep and goats is serious business. As we sit in our comfortable homes and church we know there are people out there who are struggling in so many ways. Are we doing the best that we can to listen? Are we doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God? Have our hearts become hard and calloused or is the love of Christ blooming within?

You know the answer: God is love, and love will win (if we allow it)! I will always stand with love. And I know that we stand together on that.

God is love, and love ALWAYS wins! Amen.