

Matthew 5: 21-26

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, you shall not murder and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment. And if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council. And if you say you fool, you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go first. Be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and then the judge to the guard and you will be thrown into prison. Truly, I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny, the word of God for the people of God.

Good morning everyone. I want to apologize if I have some pregnant pauses during today's sermon. I'm sure everyone can relate to times in your life when you just felt there were too many demands and you couldn't quite do any of them well. That applies today in my sermon preparation. That is going to require I do some editing on the fly, no doubt. And that may bring some pauses.

Now, most of you know what the lectionary is. The lectionary is a list of readings, scripture readings that can be used during church services over the course of three years. You have Years A, B, and C, and then you go back to A. The idea is a lot of readings from a lot of portions of the Bible will be covered in those three years if you follow it. Pastor Jeff generally follows the lectionary. Today I did not, I broke with it for the gospel lesson, but I would like to read from a lectionary selection that was scheduled for last week from the epistles.

This is Paul's letter to Timothy. So I'm reading from the second one. Second Timothy, chapter two, verses nine through 13. He uses a couple of verses to say, I am chained in this prison, which we know he was, but he says, "the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the church, the believers (he uses the word "elect"), so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him.
If we endure, we will also reign with him.
If we deny him, he will also deny us.

If we are faithless, however, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself."

This sermon today is one that I wanted to preach very soon after the last sermon I preached here because the last sermon I preached here left me feeling I needed to follow it up with something. Well, last sermon I preached here, I talked about

consequences of sin and it was kind of a hard hitting sermon and I decided not to soften it, to just let that go and sit down. But I had felt that that really wasn't the whole gospel. And so today I'm preaching a followup to that, but I'm starting with that lectionary epistle reading from Timothy because it does kind of sum up my last sermon and I don't expect anyone to remember, but I might've entitled that sermon if I might've entitled it "Consequences." But we hear that same thing here in this letter and it sounds like Paul is saying heaven is not guaranteed. There are requirements. And he says "if this, then that." So it gets pretty serious. And I think it, it's a, it's a fitting summary for, for my last sermon.

I don't think that we can skip over the hard words of the gospel. They're part of Christian tradition that goes back all the way back and, and continued from Jesus' time. Even to this day, Jesus is constantly calling us to holiness. He's constantly setting up this, this high mark and telling us to reach for it with all we have. And he's saying that it really matters that we do this. So I think it's an important part of the gospel, but it doesn't really satisfy me. I think today's gospel reading is also pretty hard. I have it here on my smart phone because it talks about judgment and as usual, Jesus puts the focus on ourselves.

He's not usually talking about judging other people. And I may be more or less wrong about this, but when I read the gospels, the only time I really hear him talking about judgment in an ultimate sense (even then, it's not quite ultimate). But when I hear him talking about judgment, it's really aimed at people who judge. It seems Jesus' harshest judgment is reserved for people who judge other people.

It's a difficult subject, right? Because we all have to make judgments. I've always said about myself, many, not always, but, uh, at least the last half of my adult life, I've realized that I'm the kind of person who, who lacks common sense. I've learned a lot about it, but I'm better. But I don't think I ever really had it. But it's necessary in life. We need to make judgements. Good judgment keeps us out of trouble. We need to understand that people are sinners and we have to be able to figure out, you know, when we need to accept that, when we need to work around it, when we need to avoid it, and when we need to confront it. So judgment is necessary, but the most important part of judgment that Jesus wants us to have is this judgment on ourselves. And I think we see that in this gospel reading. He's not talking about so much that we should worry about other people.

He's always focusing on trying to get us to deal with the health of our soul. You know. And here he is saying, you know, we are going to be liable to judgment by God if we leave parts of our souls poorly maintained. So he talks about if a brother or sister has something against you or if you're angry at a brother or sister, you need to deal with that. And he focuses mostly our anger toward others. But I don't really want to belabor that point because the subject at hand is judgment.

As far as I'm concerned today, that's always been a problem for me. How does God judge us if God loves us? Well, we all understand this as parents, we make judgements about our children so that we can teach them. We make judgements about their

weaknesses so we can help strengthen them. But we would never make an ultimate judgment about the eternal soul of one of our children. And I don't think God does either. So I want to recognize right now and be upfront about it. I don't represent, maybe I don't even, maybe I don't even represent most of Christian tradition. But I think God does judge us in a way I call gravity judgement.

You know, God has created this world and it has certain laws. If you're standing at the top of a building, you know you can count on gravity. And if you play around up there, if you kind of push the envelope (this is coming out to be kind of a metaphor, right?), you kind of push the envelope, if you're up on that roof and you trip and fall over the edge, there's going to be a consequence to that. That's pretty serious stuff. Now you could say, well God created gravity. I mean you could say God judged that whoever steps off that building should die.

But that makes God into something I don't think Jesus stood for. God did create gravity and there is there a consequence for stepping off that roof. But God showed, Jesus showed us that God is there on the roof with us and God is trying and working in us all the time to keep us from those negative consequences. And I want to say that we, we understand that in, in, in, in the sense of of this lifetime, right?

But what do we do with all that hard scripture that talks about a judgment after death? Personally, I have this theory, which I don't have a lot of support for. It comes to me as a blend of certain things, in the Protestant tradition that I've heard some pastors and writers talk about. And it's a blend of that. And it's a blend of what I got from my younger years and a few midlife years from the Catholic Church. As most of, you know, I was raised Catholic.

Catholics have this idea of purgatory. And purgatory is in their view, a place where people go who have been saved by God. So not everyone, by virtue of birthright, gets to go to purgatory. But they teach generally that the vast majority of people do go there. My theory differs from the Catholics' right there (and elsewhere), because I believe that everyone ever born is going to purgatory, if not straight to heaven.

So after death, there's this purgatory and it's not all that pleasant. It's a time of cleansing. It's a time of being made perfect for heaven. The suggestion is that if you want to spend eternity with God as your close friend . . . That's what heaven is--you close to God; you're in close association. You're in an intimate relationship with God in which you are following God and completely devoted to God. Yeah. That's that. That complete devotion is the purity that Catholics would say is required. You could easily be in the presence of God, sure. We're in the presence of God right now, but we're not in heaven. And we would understand heaven better now if we were more pure and more united with God's will, so in a sense, the afterlife is the same as it is now. You're in the presence of God. God has not rejected you. God is in fact loving you beyond all measure.

But we have these other concerns, and those concerns are like, we might call them sin.

They are there, they are actions that aren't quite loving, that separate us from God. And just as an aside, when we talk about love the way God wants us to love it, it really goes well beyond friends and family.

This is why Jesus uses the example of the Samaritan who is considered an outcast. He used the example of lepers, which were considered untouchable. Jesus is always asking us to stretch the definition of neighbor and he says, love your neighbor as yourself. You know, I, I have days when I feel I've done pretty well, but I never have a single day when I feel I've reached that high mark. Nah. I'm looking at myself and I say, I'm hungry and I like myself, so I'll feed myself. I'm dirty and I like myself, so I'm going to shower. I'm tired and I like myself, so I'm going to give myself rest. I'm sad, and I like myself, so I'm going to give myself something to cheer me up. I want this or that. Don't really need it, but I like myself, so I'm going to buy it.

But Jesus says, love your neighbor AS yourself. To me, this is a such an incredible challenge because we know there are neighbors who need things and we don't give them those things because, you know, we don't quite love them like we love ourselves. You know, I just, maybe I'm too hard about that, you know, I don't know. But the, the major point I'm trying to make is that God, Jesus sets this very high mark for us. And what are we gonna do about that? So, so my own personal theory is something like purgatory that is, there is a judgment, a kind of gravity judgment.

But God doesn't make ultimate, permanent judgments, but instead provides an ultimate safety net. So I go a little farther than the Catholics. I say everybody's either going directly to heaven or they're going to purgatory where they will eventually finds their way to heaven. Nobody's going to hell: there is no permanent hell.

If I don't make a super big change--much faster progresd--I know I'm going to singe kind of purgatory. To me, it won't be he'll, but it will be a hellish feeling, knowing God in a way I never did. Being free of all the concerns of the body, having a heavenly body, and yet knowing I'm not really intimate with God because too much of me is not there where he is or where she is. So there's this purification process. I believe that happens.

I think it's pretty serious that we ought to get in the business of that purification process right away. I mean, one might say, well, Fred, if you're right, if Jesus really is a Universalist--that is if everybody's going to heaven--and if you're right, Fred, that everybody's gonna get there eventually, if not immediately, then why should we even make any sacrifice in this life? And the only answer I need for that question is . . . for this life itsef

If we are sufficiently purified and in the mind and heart of God, we feel for the suffering of other people and the suffering in the world. And we know that we are called to give of ourselves as Jesus gave of his self. And we know we want to put our best effort at that for the sake of those people suffering, for the sake of the world. We create, when we do that, a better world for the sake of bringing the kingdom of God on earth, as we say in the Lord's Prayer.

There are so many reasons right now to follow God, I don't need someone threatening me with hell in order to motivate me to seek purity and holiness on earth with all my heart, my mind, my soul, and my strength and to love my neighbor as myself.

Now I don't want you to judge me and try to decide how well I'm doing in that regard. (smiling) And I'm not going to judge you. That's an ultimate kind of judgement of a person's soul that the older I get, the more I realize I can not do, and I'm not even sure I can judge my own soul. But moment to moment, day to day, I have a conscience that speaks to me. And if you spend time in God's word and you spend time in church and you make these things a priority, I think your conscience will grow in the same direction and help steer you. But ultimately I don't fear hell and I don't think anyone should.

I think what we should fear is the hellish existence we have now or so many have. I think we should fear the hellish existence we'll have after death if we didn't make this growing in holiness a priority in this life. That's what I think we should fear. That's enough. That's enough. Right? When I became a parent-- I guess some of you had this experience--it took me another step higher toward loving all people. Yeah, growing spiritually, growing in this higher love, puts a burden on our hearts.

It's that burden I hear in this gospel. It is the burden I hear in the words of Paul that I read from second Timothy. It's a burden I hear here in Philippians. I mean, talk about a high bar, setting a high bar. Listen to these words from second Philippians chapter two: ". . . do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. . . . Look, each of you, not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. . . , Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. He emptied himself, took the form of a slave. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

This idea of a sort of purgatory . . . We talk about reuniting with loved ones after death, right? Yeah. How do you do that if you don't have your own identity? If you can't be recognized or recognize other people? This is not an Eastern religion where we're going to be melded into the ground of being; I'm going to be me. You're going to know me. I'm going to know you and I'm going to have memory. Because if I have identity, I have memory of who I am. And I suspect that when we see God as he is or as she is, it's gonna shine a light on us. And every way in which we fail to live up to this high calling of Christ will be revealed.

We will see the results of some of our choices, and it will be the only hell anyone will ever get. It's not that God wanted it. It's just the consequence of being created in God's image, for we are little creators in our own right, able to choose, to some degree. And by our choices, more or less, we help create who we are and who we will become, more or less--more like Jesus, or not--more in line with him, or not--more or less holy--more or less experiencing the heavenly bliss of solidarity and intimacy with God.

It's not that God judged and said, "Whoever steps off this building will be punished by

death." It's just the, it's the way God set it up. I don't know why, but I have theories about that . . . God is with us this whole time trying to keep us from falling over the edge, and God will never leave us. That's my conviction. It's not particularly Christian in tradition, because Christianity traditionally does make room for harsh and eternal judgment. But I can't square that with the love and mercy of God.

Just to finish off, I want to recommend to you two books, one of which was turned into a movie. One of which you can get from pastor Jeff's lending library. You know that you can, you can go and borrow a book from pastor Jeff. Um, the two books are called, uh, let's see. Can I remember them? Um, "The Shack." I read it and I also saw the movie and it's one of those rare times I actually think the movie was as good as the book. I don't collect movies, but I bought it. That's how much I liked it.

And then the other one was a book by Mitch Albom called "The Five People You Meet in Heaven." Well, both these books and, and the one movie are stories, fictional stories of people who died and went to heaven, but they're not quite at peace. They still have work to do. They have to do the things they didn't do that, that deal with the parts of themselves they didn't deal with. When Jesus says, pray that the kingdom of God will come to earth. He's saying, if we deal with those things better now the kingdom will be more here.

I'm so hoping that happens. Of course the only person I can change is me. It's not gonna make much difference. But I'm motivated because I want to see the world become a better place because there's too much suffering about which we can do something.

I want to invite any of you who want to talk to me about what I've said today, which are my words and I, I don't consider them truth. They're my effort to come to truth. So if anybody wants to discuss that and I'd like to hear your thoughts, but I'm going to have to run today. I've got to run out of here and I won't be able to talk today, but please feel free to do that.

Thank you for your time. I went over time. There's a saying, um, somebody once said, "Please pardon the length of this letter; I didn't have time to be brief." It does take time to get my thoughts together for a sermon and, and cut it down. It takes rewrites and I just didn't do it this time. So accept my apologies. Thank you for listening and let's end with a word of prayer.

Lord, we thank you for showing us the great extravagance of your love and for telling us that you've made us special enough, unlike anything else in the animal kingdom, to actually choose your way. And we ask that you would help us to choose your way. And when we are so called and equipped, to help others to choose your way, that your kingdom of God may come to earth, that our suffering may be reduced, that we might find our home, as we all eventually will, in your arms forever, in Jesus' name. Amen.