

January 15, 2017 “God’s Rules” Matthew 25:31-46 Isaiah 1:2-4, 15-20 Psalm 139

*Most of us grew up with some sort of rules in our house.* You knew what you could do and what you’d get in trouble if you did. Pretty early we learned how many cookies we could have, and what chores we were supposed to do, and whether and when we could cross the street. Rules were part of growing up.

So today we heard about God’s rules, things that are important to God for God’s children to take seriously. Love God, love your neighbor. Justice, concern for the poor. And today, both scriptures gave serious attention to God’s displeasure when God’s rules were broken.

Years ago I used to enjoy watching Perry Mason. His clients would always seem to be guilty at the beginning, the case against them seemed airtight, but by the end, Perry Mason, with his superb logical mind at work, would have figured out who the real criminal was and would manage to have him--or her--confessing on the stand. There was something wonderful about the triumph of justice and righteousness over the forces of evil. It felt right and good!

Today, too often, we don’t see so clearly that justice is being served. Over the last few years, DNA evidence has shown that many men were wrongly convicted and imprisoned for rape or assault, so our sense of “justice” is not so firm any more. And even cases brought to clear conclusions like this week’s sentencing of Dylan Roof to death for the shooting deaths of the nine members of the Bible study in Charleston, South Carolina, leave us feeling drained, broken by the horror of hate crimes. As we digest the daily reports of bombings of innocent civilians and shootings and drunk driving, it’s easy to wonder if there can be any justice for such actions.

The Gospel lesson for today presents the kind of court scene we can enjoy, *as long as we can picture ourselves as sheep and not goats.* There is an accounting of what has been done, and rewards and punishments are based on right or wrong actions. The truth has come out in its fullness. The Gospel offers hints about how this works: the Master comes home to ask the servants what they have done with the money he had entrusted to them; the bridegroom enters with the maidens who had brought extra oil while those who had not brought enough ended up locked out. And now Jesus tells of the final judgment, where the Son of Man returns to sit on the throne, and all the nations and people are gathered round to hear the pronouncements of justice.

The amazing thing about this scene is that those who have gathered do not seem to have any idea as to what the basis of judgment will be. Matthew shows the people being divided into groups of sheep and goats. The judge says to those on the right--that is, the sheep--“Come, enter into my glory. For when I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty you gave me something to drink, and when I was naked you gave me some clothes, and when I was sick or in prison you visited me.”

And to the goats he said (in a loose paraphrase): I was hungry and you held on to your food,  
I was thirsty and you didn’t care if my water was polluted,  
I was a stranger and you wanted me out of your country,  
I was naked and you laughed at me,

I was sick and you worried that I might be contagious.  
I was in prison and you said 'that's where your kind belong.'

All the people **on both sides** of the judge will say, "I don't remember that, *when* did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, or in prison?" And the king responds, "When you did it for one of the least--for anyone hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, or a prisoner--you did it for me." And the sheep will be saying, "Boy, am I glad that I remembered to bring that can of food for the food pantry and gave some time to the soup kitchen one day! What a relief that I gave money for the earthquake victims and a decent donation to the drug ministry!"

But the goats will be saying, "Hey, wait, that's not fair! I didn't know the rules of this game! If I had known that it was YOU, I would have helped. I thought it was some poor illegal alien in prison who deserved what he got; what was a nice person like you doing in that condition anyway? How was I supposed to know?"

How are we supposed to know? And yet, a read through the Bible makes it uncomfortably clear that God really CARES about the poor and powerless and rejected and ignored in our world. The "rules" have been made clear throughout the Bible. We heard in the reading from Isaiah this morning how exasperated God was that his children, the ones who ought to understand the rules, could not be like a donkey and *know* who their master was. Instead, they were serving themselves, dealing in corruption. Even though they prayed lots of nice prayers, they treated those without power in society badly, neglecting to do good, turning their backs on the oppressed, not caring about orphans or widows, who were the most powerless in society. Read Isaiah. Read Jeremiah. Read Ezekiel and Hosea and Amos, and it's hard NOT to see God's passion for the poor and God's contempt for whoever would be arrogant and uncaring in the face of human suffering.

So who are the hungry and the thirsty, the naked and the sick, the prisoners, today, as we have moved into 2017? Soup kitchens and shelters may have their difficulties, but the fact that our various levels of government feel responsible to provide them says something about our societal compassion. What would the judgment message also contain for us in 2017? I was on drugs and you helped me find a rehab program. I was HIV positive and you did not turn your back on me. I was of a different race and you welcomed me to the neighborhood. I was old and frail and you still came to visit me. My religion scared you, but you still allowed me to make a home in your country.

In Jesus' story, those sheep who lived with compassion were just as surprised by the judgment as those whose lives were centered on themselves. When did we do these things for you? We didn't know that was you, Jesus!

We're all busy. We've got all kinds of stresses and concerns and troubles. We may feel that what we do makes little difference in this world. But the Bible would tell us to look at our lives again, and to let our eyes and perceptions be opened in new ways. Do not give or do something good just to try to get yourself categorized as a sheep instead of a goat. Instead, allow your entire orientation toward every aspect of life to be directed by a desire to show God's love to as many people as you

can in every way that you can.

When we shared part of Psalm 139 earlier in this worship service, we acknowledged that God already knows everything about us: our motives, our actions, the times we act out of our anger and the times we are able to show love to someone. And we asked God to show us the right way, to wake us up to God's rules for a good life.

I close with a somewhat sobering story. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once wrote about a town where a fireman lived. Everyone liked the fireman because he was a nice guy. He made it a habit to be gentle and kind, which was unusual for fireman, who were supposed to be tough.

There was a fire one day, and the fireman charged to the scene of the fire with his fellow firemen and heavy equipment. As they came towards the fire, much to their surprise and chagrin, they encountered between themselves and the flames some 200 townspeople, each of whom was standing there with a water pistol, aiming at the fire, going squirt, squirt, squirt.

The fireman asked, "What's going on here?" A spokesman for the group declared, "Well, we all appreciate this wonderful work you're doing in our community, and each of us has come to contribute in some small way to your work!" Squirt, squirt.

The fireman said, "I don't get it. You are all crazy! And in the way!"

"Oh, we realize that we all could do more, couldn't we, folks?" said the spokesman. "Most definitely," everyone said. "But we just wanted to offer this token of our support." Squirt, squirt.

"You don't know what you are doing!" shouted the fireman. "True, but you have to appreciate the fact that everyone is willing to offer whatever help we can," said the spokesman. Squirt, squirt.

At that, the fireman shouted, "Get the ##&# out of here! You are in the way and keeping us from doing our job. This is no picnic, it's a fire, and a fire doesn't require well-meaning people who come to make small contributions. A fire needs people who come to give their lives!" (Taken from Wayne Rice, *More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*, p. 156)

Look at what it means to be a Christian, to really try to follow the way of Jesus. It isn't about little squirts of niceness when we're feeling generous. This is about aligning our LIVES with what is important to God. This means saying NO to racism. Saying NO to greed. Saying NO to putting other people down. It means saying YES to Jesus by sharing love and our possessions and our hope with others. God's rules must rule in our lives!! May it be so! Amen.

BEING THANKFUL.

"Giving thanks is celebrating a good harvest,  
being thankful is seeing to it that everyone is fed.

Giving thanks is celebrating our free country,  
being thankful is being a discerning citizen and taking part in the election process.

Giving thanks is giving money to the church,  
being thankful is using all our resources as stewards of the Lord.

Giving thanks is praising God for the children given us,  
being thankful is raising them up to know and serve God.

Giving thanks is loving our spouse when things are going well, being thankful is loving  
our spouse when things are not going well.

Giving thanks is praising God from whom all blessings flow,  
Being thankful is praising God anyhow.