

Matthew 21:33-46 ³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” ⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

One of my favorite scenes from the classic movie “A Christmas Story” is when Ralphie and his dad are on the side of the road after their car gets a flat tire. Ralphie is awed because he is finally able to help his dad with the tire change. Ralphie’s dad hands him the hub cap to hold and then puts the lug nuts in the hub cap. Ralphie manages to drop the hub cap and of course the lug nuts go flying.

And Ralphie lets out a cuss word which leads to him getting punished for it. When the family arrives home later that night, you see Ralphie’s brother, Randy, crying. When his mother asks what’s wrong, he replies, “Daddy’s going to kill Ralphie!”

This scene in the movie lends itself to a theme in the Christian life that is challenging and difficult to talk about – judgment. Ralphie’s father was going to judge him – and find a suitable punishment for swearing. And Randy was waiting to see what his dad was going to do to his brother.

Our gospel lesson is about judgment...it asks the question, “What will he do to them?” Listen again to this line, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

That’s really the question to ask. “What will happen to them? What will he do to them?”

And we are familiar with that question. We ask it when we are in school and one of the kids is caught cheating on a test. The teacher brings the student out in the hallway for a talk and the other students want to know, “What will happen to him or her?”

We ask it when a pro baseball player is caught taking steroids to help enhance his game. We wonder, “what will happen to him?”

We ask it when an elected official is caught in the act and is eventually brought up on charges. We wonder, “what will happen to them?”

And we ask it when we find out that countries are performing acts of cruelty on their citizens, such as torture and genocide. We want to know, “What will happen?”

Most of these examples are black and white. The one who committed the wrongdoing will be judged. He or she will be found guilty, and that’s that.

We as humans have spent a great deal of time talking about judgment. As a theologian, I can tell you that many times my colleagues and I have argued about judgment. Will there be a final Judgment Day? What kind of judge is God? What are the criteria for being judged?

Jesus spends a great deal of time talking about judgment, especially at the end of Matthew. It seems that Jesus tries in many ways to help us understand what judgment is all about, and he uses parables to do it. However, if you know anything about parables, we're more often left feeling more confused about something than getting a clear cut answer! Which may be why Jesus uses so many different parables to talk about judgment - he gives us many examples so that we can see different angles.

But even though we hear these parables and argue about judgment, we probably still don't really get it. We only understand a little bit of what judgment is all about...and more often than not, we're probably only half right, if that.

One of the common understandings about God's judgment is similar to the scene in "A Christmas Story." Ralphie does something wrong, he awaits his punishment, and his father, being a strict disciplinarian, will give a harsh punishment.

We do something wrong, we sin, so we await our punishment. And God, being a strict disciplinarian, will give us a harsh punishment. Am I right? Have you heard this before? We can ask that question of ourselves, then, when we die. We wonder, "What will happen to me?"

But what if that isn't really the whole picture? What if that picture is what WE have painted? Maybe that is how WE have acted when we've judged, or how we've been punished when someone else has judged us.

But maybe that's not what God does. Maybe that's not how God judges. In the realm of God, judgment probably doesn't look like it does in the human realm.

I want to read an excerpt from a book called "The Shack." If you have never heard of this book, I want you to remember it. I encourage you to go and buy yourself a copy of the book today, because it is deeply moving.

Before I read it to you, it's important that you understand the story a little bit. To begin with, it is a work of fiction. The main character, Mackenzie Allen Phillips, has a daughter, Missy, who has been abducted during a family vacation. There is evidence that she has been brutally murdered because evidence has been found in an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness.

Then, four years later, while Mackenzie is going through a very deep depression, he receives a strange note. It says, "Meet me at the shack. Signed, Papa." "Papa" is the name Mac's wife uses for God. Mac thinks that maybe this is Missy's killer, and so he goes to the shack, hoping to get some justice for his daughter.

But instead of finding the killer there, Mac encounters God. And in the book, God is depicted like this, "A large beaming African-American woman who crossed the distance between them and engulfed him in her arms, lifting him clear off his feet and spinning him around like a little child. And all the while she was shouting his name - 'Mackenzie Allen Phillips' - with the ardor of someone seeing a long-lost and deeply-loved relative."

I won't give away all that happens in the book, but there is a chapter called, "Here Come Da Judge" that will give us some food for thought. Mack is walking through a trail and ends up in a cave. In the cave he finds a chair and a desk, and a woman in a flowing robe. It turns out that Mack is there because he is going to judge. He is going to be the one to judge humanity.

When he argues and says that he doesn't know how to judge, she says, "Oh, that's not true. You have already proven yourself very capable...you have judged many throughout your life. You have judged the actions and even the motivations of others. You have judged the color of skin and body language and body odor. You have judged relationships. You have even judged the value of a person's life by the quality of your concept of beauty. By all accounts, you are quite well- practiced in the activity."

And so Mack takes a seat on the judgment chair (or throne) and finds out who he will be judging. The woman says, "You must choose two of your [own] children to spend eternity in God's new heavens and new earth, but only two...and you must choose three of your children to spend eternity in hell."

The woman continues and says, “Mackenzie. I am only asking you to do something that you believe God does. He knows every person ever conceived, and he knows them so much deeper and clearer than you will ever know your own children. He loves each one according to his knowledge. You believe he will condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from his presence and apart from his love. Come on now, Mackenzie. Which three of your five children will you sentence to hell?” Can you imagine that? Having to judge your own children?

“I don’t want to be the judge,” he said. How could God ask him to choose among his own children? “I can’t do it...I can’t do this” he said louder. “I WILL NOT DO THIS!” Mack yelled, his blood boiling hot inside him. “You must,” she whispered.

“I can’t! I can’t! I won’t!” he screamed. Finally he looked at her, pleading with his eyes. “Could I go instead? If you need someone to torture for eternity, I’ll go in their place. Would that work? Could I do that?? He fell at her feet, crying and begging now. “Please let me go for my children, please, I would be happy to...Please, I am begging you. Please...please.”

“Mackenzie, Mackenzie,” she whispered. Her hands gently touched his cheeks as she lifted him to his feet. “Now you sound like Jesus. You have judged well, Mackenzie. I am so proud of you...Mackenzie, judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right.”

What a line. “Judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right.” This gives us a little different understanding of judgment, doesn’t it? Maybe judgment isn’t about being sentenced to live eternity in hell...maybe it isn’t about an angry God who is just waiting to strike us down with every mistake that we make.

Maybe judgment is about teaching us. Maybe it is about judging us through the eyes of Jesus – and what gentle and loving eyes Jesus has. Maybe it is about being judged after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the one who couldn’t stand to see his children suffer and be judged on their own...the one who took their place instead and the one who **TOOK OUR PLACE** on the seat of judgment.

Maybe judgment is about a God who sees us as imperfect, as sinners, but as forgiven. Maybe judgment is about a God who sees each one of us as beautiful.

So the next time you ask, “What will happen to me or him or her,” remember this: JESUS is what happened, and forgiveness is what we got.” Amen.