

The Easy Yoke (or the Burden of Bad Bible Study)
The Rev. Catherine Powell, July 20, 2008
Church of the Servant

Text:

Matthew 13:

“Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.”

Today’s Gospel reading is one of the large group of New Testament stories in which there are healthy, good plants—good fruit, wheat for the barn—contrasted with worthless plants—weeds, chaff, trees that won’t bear fruit. The good plants are gathered into the barn. The bad plants are burned with unquenchable fire. Sometimes there is weeping, wailing, gnashing of teeth.

This particular reading begins in a way that makes sense in the light of our experience. Seeds are planted. We understand that: new beginnings, fresh starts, the sprouting of good things to come. When the young plants emerge, they are mixed in with weeds, intertwined, inseparable. That makes sense too. In our experience the good and bad are often intertwined. It’s hard to sort out motivations, actions, and results. It is at the end of the story that it no longer makes sense. At the end of the story the weeds—the worthless plants—are gathered and thrown into the fire.

We usually interpret this as the weeds—the bad people—being thrown away by God. Being burned up by God. But this doesn’t make sense with our understanding of God. The God I know doesn’t pluck up a bunch of people and burn them up! We know God as a forgiving, loving God, a God who transforms people and redeems them—not burns them to a crisp!

But images of justice and judgment abound in scripture. The Last Judgment is a basic Christian belief (“He will come again to judge the living and the dead.”) When I taught young people about the architectural development of church buildings, we noted that scenes of the last judgment were found in the tympanum over nearly every church entry way in the Romanesque period. Jesus was always seated in the center, in a lovely mandala. There were often angels and scales to weigh the souls. On one side were those in heaven, all standing quietly in orderly rows. On the other side were those going to hell—writhing, bent over, grimacing, devils grabbing at their ankles. Human beings are much better at picturing a graphic hell than a blissful heaven!

What is good about the idea of Last Judgment? Why is it important for us? This seems to be a worthwhile question.

We can begin by thinking about the ancient roots of our faith. We have been hearing about Abraham and Sarah and their family in our Old Testament readings. They left the broad area of Mesopotamia where there had been many gods to develop their relationship

with the one God. In Mesopotamia there were gods all over the place but they weren't necessarily gods who were interested in justice. They tended to be limited and capricious. They liked to tease human beings, some of them, to play tricks. Others might be powerful if you were standing near their particular tree (or river or mountain) but were uninterested in you if you walked a half a mile away. Abraham and Sarah taught their family about the god they knew—a different kind of god. This God was consistent and dependable. This God always cared how you lived. This God gave Law, Torah, solid standards of right and wrong. This is the God we believe in. To us it seems obvious that God is consistent and that God cares about right and wrong. But a God of justice was a revelatory idea to them. This gave life meaning. The future was not controlled by luck or fate or caprice. How one lived mattered.

A second helpful idea about Last Judgment is one I heard from Verna Dozier some years ago. Verna was a DC school teacher for 30 years; when she retired she spent the next 30 years teaching and writing about the Bible. Verna said that the idea of Last Judgment reminds us that God is not finished yet. The last word has not been said. This requires us to have patience with ourselves and others—as well as offering hope when things look bad. It also reminds us that our judgments are based on partial understanding. So we cannot demand that others accept our judgment. The whole truth will be revealed only at the end, and not by us—by God and God alone.

The third conversation that shone light on the idea of judgment for me came from Bishop Barbara Harris. Barbara was the first woman Episcopal bishop, and she has been a strong voice for social justice. Barbara told this story:

Once there was a group of people who lived beside a river. One day someone was doing laundry at the river's edge when she saw a young child floating by in the river. The child was nearly drowning. She managed to wade in and pull the child to safety. The villagers wrapped the little one in a towel and nursed her to health. She was too young to talk. They found a foster family for her. But the next day, someone who was fishing saw two more children in the water. And maybe there was a third one near the other bank that he couldn't quite see. But he pulled out the two and the villagers shared blankets and found homes for them. But this didn't stop. Nearly every day the villagers rescued one or two or three more children. They took turns watching the river, day and night. And they were getting a little short on blankets and beds, getting a little worried. About that time a traveler came through the village. The village elder told him their problem—the children, the task of watching the river banks, the stress of finding them homes. What should be done? The traveler said, "Have you thought to ask who in hell is throwing these children into the river?! Get on that path and walk up there and stop it!"

Barbara knew that we in the church sometimes get so caught up in charity—in being helpful and understanding. Yet being understanding and nice in the face of obvious injustice is absurd. Sometimes we must raise our voices, allowing our anger to propel us towards change. We must shout. We must act. Sometimes we're so busy trying NOT to judge that we don't act. It is judgment that moves us to action.

When we circle back to the original story from today's gospel we can look at it a little differently. Maybe the good wheat on the one hand and the bad weeds on the other are not individual people. I know *I'm* not all good...or all bad. I know our society is not all good... or all bad. We can think of Jesus' story in terms of final judgment when God will tease out the good within us from the bad within us. God will free us from all that holds us back. Maybe in that future time, that different place beyond this one, I'll be able to look at that part of me that's always comparing myself to others (better? worse?) and I'll be able to pluck it out, like a little weed. And then I'll be comfortable with everyone. And maybe that tendency you have to—whatever—give up? Lose your temper? Gossip? Criticize?—maybe that tendency will just wither up like a dried weed on a fire. It will be gone and you will be free. What if whole societies could gently pull out the greed and toss it away? What if violence was like a tissue that crinkled and turned to ash?

The final judgment may not be painless. Truth often hurts. But it will be liberating. We will be freed, released, redeemed from all that limits us and holds us back. God will bear away all that has choked and duped us, all that has hurt and blinded us, and we will become the people and the church, we yearn to be.