



Apostles' Creed 4  
January 25, 2004

John 5:25-29  
I Believe in God  
**The Judge was Judged**  
M. Craig Barnes

Continuing in our series of sermons on the Apostles Creed, we come today to the phrase *from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead*. "From thence" refers to the right hand of the father, "he" refers to the ascended Christ, "the quick" is simply an ancient name for the living, and "the dead" we know about. So what this phrase of creed affirms is that we believe the ascended Christ is the judge of the living and the dead.

I just have to say the words "judge," or "judgment," or worst of all "judgmental," and some of you want to get up and leave the sanctuary. We think it is all quite negative, condemning, and frankly we've had our fill of religious judgments. But this is a new intolerance that we have with intolerance. Dennis Prager, who writes for the Wall Street Journal, has noted that prior to 1975 dictionaries did not contain the word judgmental. But today, he claims, "Judging evil is widely considered worse than doing evil." That is especially true when the judgment comes from religious sources.

Last week, Irshad Manji's controversial new book *The Trouble with Islam* was released. It is not a scholarly treatise on Islam, and it's filled with hyperbole and relentless criticism. But she does make some personal observations as a female Muslim about how her faith has been distorted in recent years. The trouble with Islam, she claims, is its totalitarian impulse.

Could we not say the same thing about Christianity? Has it not also been used to oppress and legitimize injustice by those who have a harsh impulse toward judgment? We have all been judged by some lunatic Christians who could only feel better about themselves by denouncing us.

So do we really want to stand in church and confess we believe in Jesus as the judge? Why can't the church just be accepting? Why can't we say it doesn't matter what you believe and do as long as you're sincere and not a hypocrite? "Trust your instincts," we say, "and don't let anybody judge you for it." But is it not our ability to rise above our instincts that makes us humans, created in the image of God? My dog trusts his instincts and you wouldn't believe the trouble it gets him in. Why would you want to trust your instincts when you could be a human being?

If you have ever driven a car in the United Kingdom, you know how you have to fight your instincts to stay alive. It all starts when you walk up to the wrong side of the rental car. Then you sit in the driver's seat but have to reach to the other side to get your seat belt. The shift is on the left side, and first gear is way off to the left. The whole time you are driving you don't enter into conversation or relax to music, because you just keep thinking stay to the left, stay to the left. Unless you are on a highway, then the left lane is the slow lane. And when you come to the roundabouts, which are omnipresent over there, you have to keep thinking look right, drive left, look right, drive left. It takes all of your mental energy to avoid a crash. The last thing you want to do is trust your instincts. Your instincts will kill you!

It doesn't matter that you have an instinct to hurt when you are hurt, or to find someone just to take away the loneliness for a night, or to hoard your money because you're afraid of the future. You have been created with the capacity to think through your actions. And that takes judgment.

There are good uses of the word judgment. If you have ever been in court and heard a judgment in your favor, you are delighted. None of my students who received an A on an exam have ever questioned my judgment. And do we not teach children to have good judgment? Why do we instruct our kids to know the difference in right and wrong? Is it not because we love them that we say, "No, no, honey, don't touch the hot stove."?

This is the sense of judgment that both the Old and New Testaments use to talk about God, who says "No, no. Don't ignore the poor. Don't make idols, it will only hurt you." The law was not given to condemn us, but to serve as means of enjoying life. It is because God loves us that he reveals his judgments to us. The opposite of judgment is not love. The opposite of judgment is indifference, and God is not indifferent about you.

Can you imagine going to a doctor who discovers a disease your body? But the doctor thinks, "I don't want to be judgmental. After all disease is a natural thing, and I don't want to hurt my patient's feelings. I better not say anything." No, a caring doctor will tell you what is wrong, and how to find healing. Trying to get rid of the judgment of God is like getting rid of the great Physician. It may protect your feelings, but it does nothing for the disease called sin which is slowly eating away our souls.

The first chapter of Romans claims that God's law was written on all of our hearts. Whether they are religious or not, all humans have some innate sense of right and wrong. That is because, again, this is part of what it means that we are made in the image of God. This law on our hearts is manifested in different ways. For some people the law is maintaining good relationships or healthy families. For others it all about becoming successful, or making a large impact with life. For still others the law is to maintain good health, and they are fundamentalists about their regimens of exercise.

The striking thing is that no matter what measure we are using for life none of us feel like we are doing well enough - by our own standards. Late at night when we are lying in bed staring at the ceiling no longer able to distract ourselves with busyness, the judgments come back: "I have to do more. I am not good enough." So we don't need Jesus to feel judged. That we can handle on our own.

When you come across the Prayer of Confession in the worship service, none of you are surprised. And when we get to the silent confession, do any of us have nothing to say? If you are like me, you don't have enough time to say it all. In the words of Martin Marty, one of the great contributions of the church to society is that every Sunday we get millions of sinners off the street for one hour. But no matter how much we confess, we can never get to the bottom of what we know is there. As someone said, it is hard to achieve total humility, but total humiliation is always in reach. That is what we confess - not just our list of sins, but our inclination to sin. We confess that humiliating the dignity with which we were created is always within reach.

The purpose of the Prayer of Confession is not to judge you but to allow you to tell the truth that you know about yourself. However, that is only so your heart is open to the greater truth about God. "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." My job as a preacher isn't to offer a bunch of "bad dog" sermons that call you a sinner. None of us are really confused about that. What we are confused about, is what to do with these judgments we make of ourselves. And they are just killing us.

When you fail at the law of God, the law written on your heart, it is more than a mere mistake or failure. It is a way of separating ourselves from God, the Maker, the source of our lives. And to be separated from the source life is to be dead. You don't have to wait to be dead to be dead. All you have to do is to get used to living with your own judgments about not being good enough. And life will slowly wither. Oh, it may still be comfortable, but not what your heart yearns for as life.

God will never settle for that. So in Christ God entered the world and your life to restore you to communion with your Maker, the giver of life. That is who Jesus Christ is - the incarnation of a grace who

has come to find you and to bring you back to the Father so you can live again. On the cross the judge was judged for us, that we may not be abandoned to a life of death.

The great theologian Karl Barth spent many of his Sundays preaching to the prisoners in a local jail. These sermons have been collected in a wonderful book called *Deliverance to the Captives*. In one of those sermons he told those men who were under a sentence for their guilt that the death of Christ on the cross was not an act of God's wrath or judgment against us. Rather it was born out of his love and desire to free us from the sentence of death. "In the death of Jesus Christ," Barth said, "God has cleared away, swept out and let go up in flames, smoke and ashes, the old man in us, that we may live a new life of freedom."

As Jesus is recorded saying in our text today, "The hour is coming and now is here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." When you hear that voice, he goes on to say, it is time to come out of the grave. Either to life or to condemnation. It all depends on how you respond to the grace.

Do you see what Jesus has done? Do you see how he has revolutionized our understanding of judgment? After a Savior has appeared at the door of the grave, appeared before your life that you have judged inadequate and is slipping away, the judgment of God is no longer about what you do or don't do. It is about whether you accept the offer to be forgiven. To be forgiven means to be freed. It means to be free from trying to get life right on your own, and free for receiving life as the unfolding mystery that God is making right in Christ.

When you know what it means to be made fully alive in Christ, you are no longer bothered by the judgments of others, you no longer waste your fleeting years trying to be good enough, and best of all you no longer settle for trying to make the grave comfortable.

The hour is coming and now is here: it is time to accept forgiveness and come out of the grave. Amen.