



Heaven's Surprise



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

November 26, 2017
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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The Rev. Andrew W. Walter
Grace Episcopal Church
Christ the King Sunday
November 26, 2017
Matthew 25:31-46

*I was shocked, confused, and bewildered as I entered Heaven's door,
Not by its peace, the beauty, the lights or seeing its decor.*

*But it was the people up in Heaven who made me sputter and gasp--
The thieves, the liars, the sinners, the cheaters and the trash.*

*There stood the kid from seventh grade who stole my lunch money twice.
And, next to him was my old neighbor, who never said anything nice.*

*Herb, who I always thought was rotting away in hell,
Was sitting up there all pretty, and looking incredibly well.*

*I gave a nudge Jesus, 'I'd love to hear your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here? God must have made a mistake.*

*'And why is everyone so quiet, so somber - give me a clue.'
And, Jesus said, 'Hush, my child. Take a deep breath. No one thought they'd be seeing you.'*¹

For the past few weeks, our Gospel readings have been parables of judgment, with Jesus talking to his disciples about the end of times, when he would return to judge the living and the dead. These parables tend to be ominous and foreboding, and in them, Jesus seems out of character, not compassionate and understanding but very stern and critical. Gone are his usual words of love and mercy. There is no “blessed are the poor;” “love your neighbor as yourself;” “forgive those who trespass against you.” Instead, we hear Jesus speaking in tones that are harsh and demanding. Last week, it was, “throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This week, he talks of separating the sheep from the goats, and it is: “you that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

And, that can be scary, hearing Jesus speak in this manner and using those kinds of words, especially when it comes to the idea of Judgment Day.

The mere thought of standing before God Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, and being judged for the life we have lived... Personally, I am not sure I want to do that. I see myself standing in line, waiting to be judged, and when the person-in-charge looks my way and calls out “Next,” I point to the person behind me and say, “She was here first.”

We probably all feel like we are good people and have lived a good life, but at the same time, there are probably things we have done and left undone of which we are not proud, of which we are ashamed. It doesn't matter who we are. We all have skeletons in our closet. We all have things we do not talk about, even with those who love us and know us the best, but when we stand before the Son of Man, those parts of our past will come up because judgment is about facing our lives, openly and honestly. Judgment isn't about airing our dirty laundry. It is about standing before God completely naked, our soul bared for all creation to see – no protection, no masks, no pretensions or excuses – just standing there as we are and facing the truth about ourselves.

¹ *Heaven's Surprise*, Attributed to Rod Hemphill

And, that can be scary. That can be scary because, ultimately, we are afraid we won't measure up. We are afraid we'll come up short. On the outside, we all believe we should get a green light and cruise right on past the Pearly Gates, with nothing more than an obligatory wave at Saint Peter. After all, we are not the thieves, the liars, the sinners, the cheaters or the trash. But, on the inside, on the inside, we are not so sure. We are not so certain of our fate, because we know we have more in common with those other people than we like to admit, and there are probably some people out in the world who would be surprised if we made it to heaven. So, somewhere deep inside we are a little worried that we will arrive at the Pearly Gates and God will say, "Wait a minute. Hold on a second. We have to talk a little first."

Usually, mainline liberal Protestants, and Episcopalians in particular, are well known for NOT talking about these subjects. Hell and judgment are not typically on our liturgical or theological menu, so you can bring your family and friends to church on Thanksgiving weekend without having to worry about the preacher embarrassing you, talking all fire and brimstone, but with these readings over the past few weeks, we almost can't NOT talk about the judgment of God, because the parables' stern message is so disturbing and unexpected, raising questions, concerns, and a lot of unsettling emotions. Therefore, I want to comment on the parables by making three brief, theological points about this notion of God's judgment.

First, I believe there will be a judgment. I do not know where or when, as Jesus said, "You will know neither the day nor the hour." But, I do believe it will happen. We say so every week in the Nicene Creed, and the idea has a biblical foundation, as well, so it is supported by our scripture and our tradition.

Second, we will be judged by what we do in this life. Jesus has very clear expectations for us, how we are to treat one another and care for one another. Last week's parable emphasized the importance of doing something to bring the Kingdom of God a little closer, right here and right now, and this week's story tells us to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and care for the sick. It does not matter who we are. Everyone can find something to do, something to make the kingdom of God that much more real and that much more tangible, especially for those who are in need, and Jesus expects us to do that.

Third, when the time comes, our judge will be Jesus. Our judge will be the One who knows us better than we know ourselves, the One who loves us more fully and deeply than we love ourselves. Our judge will be the babe lying in the manger, the shepherd who leaves his flock to find the lost. Our judge will be the Good Samaritan, the father who welcomes home his prodigal son. Our judge will be Jesus, who lived and died and rose again, to reconcile us and God, once and for all, and to green light us straight into heaven. That is the Good News. Amidst all of the stern and harsh language about judgment, there is good news, and that good news is Jesus. Jesus makes all the difference.

As Barbara Brown Taylor, the well-known preacher, once said:

It seems vitally important to remember that our salvation depends, finally, not on our own goodness but on the goodness of the judge, who is not some stranger behind a glass wall but a savior – a saver of life – who has pledged us his presence, his help and his love.

One thing you can say for sure about judgment is that it will have far less to do with who we are than with who God is. And if we can face the prospect of it with our eyes wide open, it is not because we are confident in our own goodness but because we are confident in God's goodness.

There will be a judgment. We will be judged on how we live. And, our judge will be Christ, which makes all the difference.

So,

*Don't be shocked, confused, or bewildered as you enter Heaven's door,
Not by its peace, the beauty, the lights or seeing its decor.*

*The people up in Heaven might make you sputter and gasp--
The thieves, the liars, the sinners, the cheaters and the trash.*

*You'll see the kid from seventh grade who stole your lunch money twice.
And, next to him will be your neighbor, who never said anything nice.*

*Herb, who you always thought was rotting away in hell,
Will be sitting up there all pretty, and looking incredibly well.*

*But still, you will be there, too, because God has let you in,
Since Jesus the Judge loved you and saved you from all sin.*

Amen.