

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 14, 2013

Third Sunday of Easter

Romans 2:1-16  
Creed 10

## **...from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.**

I have been enjoy our time with the Apostles' Creed this year as a sort of journey. On the calendar it has a beginning, middle and an end. Feb. 17, March 31, and May 19<sup>th</sup> to be exact. It has sections where the road is smooth, sharp corners that take us to new places (descended into Hell) and rough pavement where we're forced to slow down a bit. Today is one of these.

Next Sunday we'll start the Third Article (or paragraph) with I believe in the Holy Spirit... the last section of the Creed. But before we turn the corner to head toward the destination – the great Amen on Confirmation Sunday, we have to make our way through "... From there he will come to judge the living and the dead."

Those who learned or discovered the creed more than 20 years ago, probably learned "...the quick and the dead..." And of course there was that 1995 movie with Sharon Stone and Gene Hackman of the same title (also taking place in the town of Redemption – the Hackman character was named Herod).

But here, quick does not mean fast – it means alive. Though I'm sure there are situations where if you're not quick, you might be dead. Doctors refer to the moment when a baby first moves in the womb as the baby "quickening."

Anyway, here, in this line of the Creed, we come face to face with the Judgment of the Lord – a doctrine of the church, which may be the most misused in Christian history. And unfortunately we don't have to back very far in history to see the abuses. September 11 had people declaring that that tragedy was God's judgment on us for any number of reasons. If you have HIV/AIDS, there are plenty of people willing to label your illness as God's judgment.

I find it helpful to think about what the Judgment is NOT as a way to get at what it is. It is not a heavenly version of Judge Judy (though we might wish it were as long as we're on the good side of the issue...) It is NOT like the cartoons we see where St. Peter stands at a podium before the gates of heaven on a cloud. It is NOT a vehicle for the revenge WE think someone else deserves.

And I think if we're honest, we can admit that we do want there to be a Divine Judgment of some sort. We don't want God to just gloss over the harm that is done to us, to others and to the earth and all that is in it. Because judgment is more than just saying something is wrong. Judgment is not just about wrong deeds. Judges also declare people to be innocent, and deeds to be good and righteous.

To judge is simply to make a determination about the nature of an act. Judgment is not condemnation. If there were no judgment, there would also not be the opportunity for us to hear, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

And the reason we can truly welcome the judgment of the Lord is because we know the judge. We need to be clear about WHO is doing the judging – and the good news is, NOT US. It is Jesus. And that JESUS is judging us says something important I think. Remember this is the same Jesus who was born of Mary, suffered, was crucified and died. And remember the point of all that, is to make it clear that Jesus was a human being who knows what it is to suffer and die. We have a God who knows how we feel when the going gets tough.

This is who is judging us – one who has compassion, who came to save, who will leave the 99 to seek out the one who is lost, who faced all the cruelty the power of Rome could muster and said, “Father forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.”

The Christian faith proclaims that Jesus reveals to us the nature of God – that Jesus IS God in the flesh, and we can know what to expect from God by looking at how Jesus behaves.

When someone strikes him, he doesn’t hit back

When a woman is brought to him caught in the act of adultery, he does not condemn her. He acknowledges her sin and tells her to go and sin no more.

His disciples desert him, and yet he returns after the resurrection to bring them back into the fold.

He knows Judas will betray him, and yet he shares his last meal with him.

The one who dies and rises and ascends to God so that we might do the same is the very one who returns to judge the living and the dead. I hope you are not afraid of Jesus and his return. Because the Bible declares that “there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus.”

But it is so hard not to put ourselves in the place of God and Jesus who are the ones to do the judging.

Look at who God used, and favored in the Bible.

Moses who committed murder, yet God used him to bring the Hebrews to the Promised land and prophesied that the Messiah would be a prophet like Moses.

King David committed adultery and then murdered one of his most faithful soldiers to cover it up, and yet it was King David’s bloodline that eventually gave birth to Jesus.

Paul persecuted Christians and dragged them out of their homes to be executed, and then God called him, almost single-handedly, to spread the Gospel across the known world.

It is God who did these things...the God whose nature was fully revealed in Jesus...who will judge us as well. He comes to judge the living and the dead – to prod us and to try to turn us around when we are headed in the wrong direction, and to cheer us on when we’re on track.

And in doing so, his judgment begins to look like justice. And here again we need to allow that word to be reshaped by the framework of the faith.

Justice means setting things right, creating a just order rather than wreaking vengeance. Think of the word justified in the context of typing. When the text is “justified” it is lined up evenly on the page. The lines go to the same spot at the edge of the margins. Our word “adjust” comes from the same root.

To get things lined up as they should be – Justice. Certainly, evil is an undeniable reality in our world and justice often goes lacking. And so, it is only natural that we, like the biblical writers, would look forward to a time when justice will prevail.

The story of God and His people is not complete unless and until God sets everything right. And everything cannot be set right until Jesus returns, as he rightfully deserves, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And, everything cannot be set right until Jesus gives his judgment, about the world, its systems, and its people. In other words, the setting right of everything awaits the return of Jesus and his judgment.

So, it's not enough to say, "Well, Jesus gave us a wonderful example to live by, and that's all that we need." Nor is it enough to say, "We need to work for God's kingdom to come on this earth as it is in heaven." That is true, and we do need to do just that, but the only reason we need to do so is because one day, God's will is absolutely going to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

"I want neither a terrorist spirituality that keeps me in a perpetual state of fright about being in right relationship with my heavenly Father, nor a sappy spirituality that portrays God as such a benign teddy bear that there is no aberrant behavior or desire of mine that he will not condone. I want a relationship with the Abba of Jesus, who is infinitely compassionate with my brokenness and at the same time an awesome, incomprehensible, and unwieldy Mystery." (Brennan Manning 1934-2013)

Frederick Buechner:

We are all of us judged every day. We are judged by the face that looks back at us from the bathroom mirror. We are judged by the faces of the people we love and by the faces and lives of our children and by our dreams. Each day finds us at the junction of many roads, and we are judged as much by the roads we have not taken as by the roads we have.

The New Testament proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future, God will ring down the final curtain on history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.

Jesus comes "from there/thence" – not from a despotic, vengeful place – but from the Father Almighty, who created us in love and redeems us in Jesus.

Jesus is the righteous judge. In other words, he doesn't judge like we would. Our job is not to figure out how Jesus is going to judge, our job is to live in light of Jesus love for the world. To live as he lived. To see the world as he saw it, as sheep without a shepherd. To love God and love others.

Jesus' judgment is not just about going to heaven when we die, it's about God's opinion of everything here on earth, including us. Whether we are among the living or the dead when Jesus returns does not matter. What does matter is whether we are among the faithful.

That is what we're saying when we say that we believe that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. Amen.