

You may not notice it at first, but this morning's parable taps into something deep within us, something primal about how we view God and how we see ourselves. Spending time digging into this parable can help you see where your understanding of who God is can be either destructive or enriching for your life.

You can ignore this parable if you want. You can ignore all the stuff about God that's difficult, or that doesn't fit into the picture you formed of God when you were young. But I hope you won't do that this morning. I hope you won't miss this wonderful chance to go deeper with God.

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The parable paints a simple picture of God and humanity. The world is full of good people and bad people. One day God will sort out the good from the bad, and the good will go to heaven and the bad will be burned away. Whether you like it or not, that's basically what the parable says. God rewards the good and destroys the bad and at the end of the age you and I will find out which one we were.

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Now, as stark as that picture is, a lot of good can come from seeing God the way this parable does. Because sometimes, when people's lives are filled with chaos and loss, embracing this view of God helps them when they try to make a change.

"There are rules about how to treat one another and breaking those rules has led me to a dead end, so it's time to start following the rules."

I come from a culture that embraces this understanding of God and on the whole, it has blessed them. Community values like order, stability, and hard work came from this understanding of God.

But those blessings come with a cost. People who disrupt the order, who question the rules, people who are different from the cultural norms, suffer in communities that mistake rule following with faithfulness, that see God as simply the rewarder of the virtuous and the punisher of the wicked.

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So other people reject that view of God altogether. They believe in the God of unconditional, unquestioning love, the God who affirms us, who believes in ME, no matter what.

A lot of good comes from seeing God this way, too. A lot of healing, especially for those people who were rejected by that authoritarian view I grew up in. When you feel rejected by the people around you, it helps to trust that God is lifting you up, that God believes in you no matter what. It also helps you be a friend and a protector to others who feel rejected and alone.

But there is a cost to this view of God, too. A God without judgment leads to a life without consequences, to a universe without justice. It's also not at all the picture of God we find in our scriptures. And the biggest danger is that the God we believe in starts to look an awful lot like my reflection in the mirror. Because a God who always affirms my choices is as much a false God as the one who only exists to reward or punish.

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Now there is a third option to this little dialectic, one that Anglican Christianity can help us see. The third option - the better option - is to take seriously this parable and what it tells us about God, but to place it in the context of all the other things we understand about God. The third option asks,

- What ELSE does the Bible teach us about God?
- What OTHER parables did Jesus tell us about God?
- What have YOU experienced of God in your own life?
- And most importantly, what can we learn of God
by studying not just the words, but also the ACTIONS of Jesus?

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Jesus is speaking to us this morning as a prophet, speaking to us in the language of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos and John the Baptist. The prophets used confrontational, combative language to snap the people of God out of their delusions. The prophets spoke of punishment because God's people too often forgot that God IS a God of judgment. But the prophets also spoke of reconciliation and mercy, just like Jesus does.

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Jesus absolutely talks about judgment and punishment, about a rich man condemned for ignoring the needs of the poor, about separating the sheep from the goats at the last day. But he also told us about a prodigal son who was welcomed home, and about a shepherd who dropped everything to search for one lost sheep out of a hundred.

And do you remember the stories of redemption we heard when some of you gave your testimonies this winter? Do you remember hearing about people who were walking a dark path until God's unrelenting love showed them a way to life and health?

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And most importantly, what about the life of Jesus? If Jesus IS God Incarnate, does his life show us a vengeful God, or a God who affirms and accepts us no matter how we treat each other? Why would Jesus forgive the sins of the man whose friends lowered him through the ceiling, if he were already condemned as evil? After Jesus saved the woman caught in adultery, why would he tell her to go and sin no more if he wasn't judging her behavior?

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My best friend from high school is Curtis Eggleston and his daddy's was Carl. Carl was...intimidating. He was tall but also a little bent over from years of hard work. Carl fit a certain archetype in 20th c. America.

He was a veteran who made a career working in manufacturing plants. He was a faithful churchman who sang in the choir, and because he smoked all his life he made me sound like a squeaky little tenor. Carl was devoted to his wife and children, and his purpose in life was providing for them and protecting them. Carl was conservative in the old sense of the term, before it carried all the baggage it does today. One day when Curtis was a teenager and feeling himself a little bit, he got mouthy with his mom and told her he wouldn't do what she told him.

The conversation escalated until Carl walked up to his son, leaned in, and told him to either do what his mother asked, or go to the back yard where they would

have a meeting to decide whose house this was and who was in charge of it. Curtis wisely decided to skip that backyard meeting and do what his mother told him.

Now, fun story and a great line - there's a chance I used it once or twice - but the important thing to know about Carl is that in all the time I knew him he never laid a hand on Curtis or on anybody except to give them a hug, and that even if Curtis had taken his father's challenge, I've no doubt that Carl would have figured out how to make his point without ever resorting to violence.

The threat...was a metaphor, that taught his son about boundaries and burdens and responsibilities.

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Carl challenged his son because Curtis needed to be pulled out of the selfishness and arrogance that teenagers fall into. He used the metaphor of violence because he needed to grab his son's attention. He needed to remind him that there were consequences to bad behavior. But Carl's whole adult life was about devotion and service to his family. Carl was there at every ball game, at every youth group fundraiser, was there at Curtis' wedding.

He taught his son how to love, and sacrifice, and support. And maybe that's how it is with God and each one of us: a God who loves and redeems and inspires, but who also holds us accountable and sometimes even shocks us into seeing what we have done.

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We each carry a vision of God in our minds, one we probably formed in childhood. Some of us lean a little more into the God of authority, others to the God of acceptance. One sermon won't change that, nor should it.

But don't waste what this parable offers you this morning, a chance to examine your assumptions about God, to see if it's become distorted through lazy thinking or unexamined experiences. Don't waste this opportunity. ALL of Jesus' parables will bless you, if you let them. ALL the teachings of Jesus can change your life.

Amen.