

The Mercy of Judgment (Amos 7:7-17)

Here's a little-known fact about me: I have this thing about guilt; I know it **should** be a healthy response to having done something wrong. If I hurt someone, I **should** feel guilty. If I back over your prize begonias or snap at my wife because she forgot to remind me to pay the credit card bill like I specifically asked her to—feeling guilty afterward is an appropriate response.

Good social hygiene requires us to feel some guilt for messing up. People who feel no guilt, who have no conscience, are dangerous. Sociopaths. Psychopaths. Malignant narcissists. We've been living that nightmare with some of our politicians for a while now.

So, feeling guilt is a necessary part of being ... what we in the profession call ... a **grown-up**. To live together in community, we need people to take responsibility for their actions. And one of the

ways that humans are motivated to do this is by feeling guilty when they do something wrong.

Okay, so fine ... guilt is a useful part of living with other human beings. But, I've got to be honest with you, I don't like it. I don't like feeling guilty one bit.

I'm a Type-2 diabetic. Both my parents and one grandparent ... diabetic. The nutritionist told me that for me, it wasn't really a matter of **if** I'd get diabetes but **when**.

Anyway, living with diabetes has introduced an entirely new category of things to feel guilty about. So, yay me. Knowing you're digging your own grave with your mouth presents a new and urgent sense of guilt.

One of the ways this newfound gastronomic shame has manifested in my life is a profound dread of going to the doctor—which feels a little extra to me. I mean, my doctor is

great. Super supportive. Doesn't berate me. Doesn't try to make me **feel** guilty. All he does is read the lab work and make recommendations about how we'll move forward in this new war against my obstreperous pancreas.

So, my doctor doesn't try to make me feel guilty; in fact, he takes great pains **not** to make me feel guilty. But he represents a reality check—holding up a mirror that displays my health, a mirror that produces guilt in me. And I don't like it. Not one bit.

In my experience, most people don't like feeling guilty—which means there's a second thing most people don't like: feeling judged.

Interestingly, one of the places people avoid most assiduously for fear of being judged is ... you guessed it: church.

I get it. I was a preacher's kid. I attended my share of tent revivals where the preacher leaned into the whole

“you’re-going-to-hell-unless-you-repent” thing. I remember feeling completely lost. I’d been taught that “Jesus-loves-me-this-I-know.” I loved church. I loved God. Heck, the parsonage we lived in contained my dad’s student church in the **basement**. I was around that stuff all the time, and I wasn’t scared at all—until it came to those hellfire and damnation dopes, who really messed with my head by making me feel judged and guilty.

Of course, at the tender age of seven, I’m not sure now what I was supposed to have done that would make God torture me forever ... but the revival guys (it was always **guys**) were insistent that I was on the express train to perdition if I didn’t get my spiritual act together.

So, I grew up knowing whatever else I might be or do, I wasn’t going to try to get people to love God by making them feel guilty. I always responded better to a loving God, a doting parent, a

merciful teacher. I figured **that** was the God I was interested in talking about—not the other.

Interestingly enough, this pastoral and homiletical stance on judgment and grace wasn't universally embraced in churches I've served. In a couple of churches early on, after I'd preach a sermon about how much God loves us, I'd invariably get people who'd meet me at the back door and say something like, "That was real nice, Brother Derek, but I don't feel like I've been to church unless the preacher steps on my toes a little."

That whole judgmental-God thing didn't make much sense to me. But after the Rodney King verdict and the Los Angeles riots that ensued, I figured maybe I'd get on people's good side by condemning the kind of institutional racism that caused a Black man to be beaten half to death—all on videotape. I went full Old Testament prophet, talking about the injustice of racism and how God expects more of God's children than this kind of violent disregard for human dignity.

I was scared to death.

Turns out, some people didn't actually mean that whole "stepping-on-our-toes-is-a-good-thing"—at least when it comes to **some** issues. Don't swear. Don't have sex outside of marriage. Don't steal. Make sure you do your daily devotions and go to church every Sunday. Some people apparently **like** to feel guilty about that kind of stuff.

But they draw the line at being told God has a problem with us being racist, homophobic, sexist, transphobic, ableist, or xenophobic. "That," they say, "is too political."

Nevertheless, "God-as-judge" has fallen on tough times, hasn't it? Most of us don't particularly care for folks with bullhorns and sandwich boards walking around telling us that we're sinners dangling over the precipice of hell by the thinnest thread.

In my experience, most folks recoil from the image of God as a perpetually frustrated parent wandering around with a magnifying glass looking for things to be disappointed with.

Consequently, apart from some fundamentalist preachers, we tend to shy away from talking about God's judgment in polite company. It just feels too ... I don't know ... medieval, doesn't it? Too judgmental for modern sensibilities.

Which is why I felt uncomfortable when I was studying for this sermon. I mean, the whole thing is super judgy, isn't it? Amos talking about God sitting in judgment on Israel just doesn't strike me as very enlightened modern behavior.

Of course, I'm not alone in this assessment. In our text for this morning, the priest, Amaziah, finds Amos's proclamation of an angry God to be every bit as objectionable as we moderns do. He runs straight to the king to tattle: "Amos has conspired against

you in the very center of the house of Israel, the land is not able to bear all his words.”

What words are those?

The Lord said,

*See, I am setting a plumb-line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by;
the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the
sword.*

So, the court priest, Amaziah, comes back to Amos and says,

*O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread
there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at
Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the
kingdom.*

And how does Amos respond?

He tells Amaziah that, look, this whole thing wasn't **his** idea in the first place. He was down in the southern kingdom, tending sheep, dressing sycamores, minding his own business when God came to him and said, "Look, I've got a little job for you up in the northern kingdom."

You see, that's the thing about true prophets—they don't typically aspire to the job. Nobody with any sense sits around and says, "You know what? I think I'm going to be a prophet. Looks like a pretty great life."

You wanna know why nobody says that?

First of all, being a true prophet is a lousy job. Very few people want to see the prophet coming. Even in bad times, prophets just feel too judgmental. And really, don't we already have enough of that in our lives?

Second, the heart of their job is going to powerful people and telling them stuff they don't want to hear—that God's not pleased with how they're running the show.

Turns out, people in power aren't casually waiting for someone to show up and tell them that not only are they doing it wrong, they're the source of injustice in the world. Nobody wants to hear that—especially those folks who've been told their whole lives what precious flowers they are, that the world is lucky to have them.

This passage from Amos is a famous one. It includes a well-known metaphor: the plumb-line. But the Hebrew word used here is 'anak, which is used only once in the whole of Hebrew Scriptures—so we don't actually know exactly what it means. Some early translations identify it as a mason's trowel. I prefer the way the Jewish Study Bible translates it: pick-ax—which seems to fit with God's anger and the sword God wields in verse 9.

That's quite a picture, isn't it?

God strolling into Israel carrying a pick-ax in one hand and a sword in the other—laying waste to the pagan sanctuaries. That'll make your innards seize up, won't it?

Amaziah knows that that kind of message will only rile the natives. Too political, too divisive. Too judgmental. And who needs that, right?

The thing is, it's not just modern people who have a hard time with God as judge, being told the world they've made for themselves has failed to please God. That's why we still have court priests, false prophets whose job, whose whole reason for existing is to reassure the folks in power that God's just fine with the selfishness and casual cruelty against the most vulnerable.

So, 2,700 years later, the question we must continually wrestle with is how do we know which prophets speak **God's** truth and which are saying whatever will keep them close to the folks in charge?

Here's a thought: any person who comes along and claims to be speaking for God but seems not to care at all about those whom God singles out for extra protection probably isn't speaking for God.

See how that works? You can expand it too.

Any preacher, for instance, who says that what God cares most about is answering your dreams for a bigger house, a nicer car, or a fatter bank account is a false prophet.

Any yahoo who tries to convince you that what God's most concerned with are sexual sins—except when those sexual sins

are committed by somebody you think can deliver your partisan policy Christmas wish list—is a false prophet.

Any loudmouth who says God cares more about refusing to bake gay wedding cakes than offering hospitality to those who've been systematically cut off from God by "well-meaning" religious types is a false prophet.

Any pastor who insists that God wants men to be in charge of making decisions for women and claims that pregnant people don't have a right to decide what they do with their bodies is a false prophet.

Anybody who claims that God is a God of grace only and not of anger when it comes to dealing with systems and authorities designed to keep the last last and the first first is a false prophet.

I remember being in a preaching class one time when one of the Black students preached on a text from the prophet Amos. It

came off to me as judgmental. "You're not doing this or this. Moreover, you should have done this and this. As a consequence, God's really mad."

And I remember saying something along the lines of, "Well, that's fine and all. But where's the grace in that sermon? You know, what about God's mercy?"

All these years later, I think I have an idea about where to find grace and mercy in that student's sermon. I think it goes without saying that there are people who show up looking for God, who don't have the slightest idea why they're even there ... except that they need to hear about a God who holds the hand of the anxious, who bears up those too weak to stand, who loves those who think themselves unlovable, who forgives the unforgivable. So yes, we need to comfort and console the frightened and grieving. We need a God of grace and mercy.

But there are also people who need to hear about a God who is furious with a world in which immigrant families are torn apart, a God whose anger flares when terrified refugees are turned away, a God whose indignation burns hot against those who would co-opt the justice system to persecute and kill LGBTQ people, a God who's unafraid of the rulers of this world who abuse the poor, who lead cheers of hatred against Muslims and the undocumented.

There are all kinds of people who would love to hear about a God who raises an arm against injustice, who will not tolerate bigotry, who refuses to sit by while the work of the laborers is monetized in ways that only benefit the people in charge, who are desperate for a word from a God who is incensed with a world in which Black parents lie awake at night in fear of what might happen to their children on the way home from school.

If you happen to be one of the people kicked to the curb by the folks in charge, God's outrage may just be what grace sounds like.

In the end, for many, God's judgment is where we find God's mercy.

—Amen.