

OPENING:

Religion, quoting the late, great George Michael, says:
(you) “gotta have faith, faith, faith/ You gotta to have faith.”
The Gospel, the Good News, says, on the other hand:
“It is finished. It’s over. You don’t need to *do* anything.”¹

Our passage from Luke that I just read offers similarly contradictory advice:
“Be watchful,”
But “don’t worry.”
“Judgement is coming,”
But “don’t be afraid.”

It reminds me of the bumper sticker that reads: “Jesus is coming, look busy!”
Be ready, in other words, so that you will avoid the punishment.
But again the Gospel instead says: “Jesus is coming, look... like you are excited
for it to happen. Be ready so that you will receive your reward.”
Which do we go with? Which do we choose? What are we supposed to do?

FAITH

It’s my firm conviction, and my sincere belief, that God’s return, the Second
Coming, that what happens “when we get to heaven”, is a gracious, and grace-
filled, event. It’s one that we should look forward to. It’s not a visit from corporate
where we need to tidy up and get our ducks in a row.

Instead, it’s a great gift in which we need to “be ready so that you can receive the
blessing that God is preparing for you.”²

I do really believe that...

BUT it’s much easier to imagine the opposite: that there is a “Faith meter”³ out
there and that Jesus is still somehow hanging on the cross, or enclosed in the tomb
waiting, and that if we could just move the needle of that “faith meter” by collective
action, or better yet by my actions as an individual, then it would create the
conditions where things would be better, that we would push the meter’s judgement

¹ “Pentecost 9 (C): Faith-uh” (August 1, 2022) *Same Old Song Podcast* <https://thesameoldsong.fireside.fm/223>

² Audrey West. “Theological Perspective.” in David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. in *Feasting on the Word* (Year C, Year 3, Proper 14, Luke 12:32-40) 336

³ “9th Sunday After Pentecost [C] – One Of Us” (August 1, 2022) *Strangely Warmed Podcast* <https://crackersandgrapejuice.com/9th-sunday-after-pentecost-c-one-of-us/>

scale and God's kingdom would be achieved.

That's basically how we all live, as Christians, as human beings, that if I could just have a little more faith, if I would just be a little more vigilant, a little more something, we would cross the finish line, secure the touchdown, and placate this judgmental God.

The Church is just as guilty of this instinct as any another other organization, often suggesting that Jesus told the disciples to "keep busy" rather than to not worry.⁴

That's the case because it just does not make any rational sense to live your life without marching orders, without a clear pecking order, without a nice and naughty list. It's unbearable, in fact, to live, in fact, where God has already declared the victory, that God has already set up the kingdom and that we don't control it, we are not in charge of it.

Let me introduce three images that helps, hopefully, with that tensions and expand on Jesus' instructions from our Gospel.

COURTROOM METAPHOR

First, we have this image that at some point there will be a trial, God will be the judge, we will be the defendants, and we will have to defend ourselves.

This courtroom metaphor is a rich one in quality and quantity throughout both Old and New Testament. It's an image that's on our minds as we hear these instructions to get ready, to be vigilant, to prepare our defense for when the master comes.

The problem is that we picture this scene like the DMV, where we are waiting in these long lines, and that we are nervous that we have all our documentation, and that our driving record might be a little spotty, and that our vision might not pass the test.

We picture God/ Jesus/ St. Peter as that bureaucrat behind a desk, with a clip board, grouchy and legalistic, eager to send us away unhappy.

That's not however, how Scripture paints either party in this legal metaphor. Instead, it shows humans as eagerly wanting to get into the courtroom, as dying to have their case heard, not necessarily because they know they have a strong case,

⁴ Patricia J. Lull "Pastoral Perspective." in David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. in Feasting on the Word (Year C, Year 3, Proper 14, Luke 12:32-40) 336

but because that they know the character of the judge.⁵

So imagine the Second Coming where Jesus comes back not as Judge, but where he instead springs up from behind the bench and says: ‘Surprise I have been here the whole time, hunting for your indictments, but since I did not seem to find any, go home and have a nice day’”⁶

You would think that we would be eager for such a courtroom, that again we would be dying to get there.

But, for some reason, we don’t want God to be doing that either. We want God to be settling scores. Balancing the account books. Even as we are fearful of the result.

Here's how writer Robert Farrar Capon, a favorite of mine describes it:

“The church, by and large, has always been more receptive to judgment-as-settling-scores than to judgment as proceeding out of, and in accordance with, the reconciling grace of resurrection. ...

The church has found that plain old hanging-judge sermons sell, but that grace remains a drug on the market. As a preacher, I can with the greatest of ease tell people that God is going to get them, and I can be sure they will believe every word I say, But what I cannot do, without inviting utter disbelief and serious doubts about my sanity, is to proclaim that he has in fact taken away *all* the sins of the world and that he has, accordingly solved all the problems he once had with sin.... Because if I do, the same old questions will come pouring out: ‘What about Hitler?’ ‘What about child molesters?’ ‘What about my skunk of a brother-in-law?’ Their one pressing worry is always, ‘What have you done with the hell we know and love?’”⁷

PARENTS:

Here's the second image:

A child comes home from school with a drawing that he/she did, so happy to give it to the proud parent.

It's a stick figure. It's not much. But the parent is knocked over, amazed at the work. The judgement is this: let's put this masterpiece on the refrigerator as a memory of this moment because the parent's love does not depend on the quality of the gift.

⁵ Luke 18, Hosea (!) 2:4; 4:1; 12:2

⁶ Robert Farrar Capon. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans. 407-410.

⁷ Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 350-1.

We are those children, offering these stick figures to God as tokens of our faith. Somehow, some way, God says “it’s precious, it’s the *Mona Lisa* of stick figures.” God operates such that the spirit of the giving and the reception of the offering is more important than the quality itself.

You and I, the child, did not earn that love, did not earn the grace bestowed but it. But it does the work, it's a perfect offering, not because what we do is perfect, but it's made perfect if received in love.

Our faith is like that, it’s like a child’s drawing. It’s meagre, it is mustard seed size, some might say. All the so-called patriarchs of the Old Testament, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, are actually children. The story is not one of how much they moved the needle, but God’s graciousness in accepting their meagre offering.

Likewise, the disciples, who Jesus is always calling children, also don’t make Jesus be Jesus, or move him to his great deeds.

Instead they fall asleep. They turn their backs. They fight among themselves. Adolescent behavior, but Christ keeps inviting them back again and gain, disrupting the courtroom as a hope-dealing judge, loving them the same.

CONCLUSION

Here's the final metaphor: that might combine the two, the courtroom and the parental one. Take it with you as you wait in line at the DMV, as you sit in fear of God’s judgement.

Religion, and by that word I mean whatever calculus we come up with in our heads to avoid a judgmental and unforgiving God,
Religion says “I messed up. My Dad is going to kill me.”
The Gospel says “I messed up. I need to call my Dad.”⁸

AMEN

⁸ Original provenance unknown. Ubiquitous online, e.g. [Lent Day 7: When We Mess Up | Our Daily Bread Ministries](#); [Feet not Stones. – uneditedjes](#)