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**2-Narrative 11 – Isaiah
Isaiah 5:1-7, 11:1-5 (Mark 12:1-3)**

**17 November 2019
Salem, Bridgeport**

“God of Judgment or God of Love?”

I watched Ed and Annie as they got settled on chairs in my office.

Ed’s jaw was tense and Annie’s fingers nervously twirled a crumpled tissue.

His face was a bit flushed and her eyes were red.

It was obvious something serious was going on.

I invited them to pray with me and then asked, “What’s up? Tell me what brings you here today.”

Annie glanced towards Ed and he turned towards me and said, “It’s Jake”.

The couple had two children – Jake who was 17 and Jessie who was 14.

The family had been quite active in church so I knew the kids well.

Jake had been a good student,

who played short stop on his high school varsity baseball team and saxophone in the jazz band.

I’d confirmed him, and he had continued to go to workcamp each summer

and to come to church and be active in youth group until this past year.

I’d assumed he was just a busy senior but apparently there was more going on.

Jake, his parents told me, had changed.

His grades had dropped, and he had missed too many baseball practices and been cut from the team.

He was staying out past curfew and he seemed to have lost all regard for the rules.

Things had happened so gradually that by the time Ed and Annie realized something was wrong,

it seemed as if the situation was irreversible.

And even worse than what was happening to Jake, was what was happening to their family.

Annie loved her son and believed he was just going through a stage

and that if they were just patient, the old Jake would return.

Ed, on the other hand, was ready to toss him out on his ear until he shaped up.

And with such different feelings about the situation Ed’s and Annie’s relationship was now threatened.

I could understand how they felt.

They had done everything they could do for their children –

making sure they were in a great school, involved in extracurricular activities,

and most important, that they were active in the church.

When they wondered aloud where they had gone wrong, and began chastising themselves for their failure,

I assured them that they had been good parents and had done their best for their children.

But sometimes, no matter how good of a job we do, sometimes it’s not enough.

We can’t live someone else’s life for them.

Some things are just beyond our control.

That’s the case in our reading for the day.

God has done every single thing possible to bless God’s chosen people

so that they could be a blessing for others.

Isaiah says that God chose the best hilltop, cleared the land, tilled the soil, planted choice vines,

and enclosed the vineyard with a protective hedge.

There wasn’t anything else that God could’ve done in order for the vineyard to produce the best grapes,

but instead of good grapes the vineyard produced sour ones, ones that made rotten wine.

And now God had to decide what to do about it.

Should God continue to tend the vineyard? Or should God destroy it?

God was basically having the same debate within God’s self that Ed and Annie were having.

Now when it comes to God, I am all about God's love. I'm Lutheran after all!

So it's all about God's boundless grace, God's never-ending mercy, God's limitless love.

But when does God's love become enabling behavior?

When does God's mercy become meaningless?

When does God's great grace become cheap grace?

In our Old Testament reading, we have God considering punishing his disobedient children.

We have a picture of a vengeful God, the image of a God of judgment.

And that's something that I've always had difficulty fitting into my belief in a God of Infinite love.

It raises uncomfortable questions for me, like

“If I do something bad, is God going to punish me?” and

“If God is going to punish me, am I going to be punished in this life or the next? “

To be honest I'd have a hard time loving a God who would intentionally wipe out his chosen people no matter what they had done.

I'd have a hard time loving a God who turned his back on his children until they shaped up.

I'd have a hard time loving a God who got angry and punished people for their mistakes, when God knew perfectly well the circumstances that drove them to make those mistakes.

As I listened to Ed and Annie it was easier for me to understand Annie's reaction than Ed's.

Ed wanted to throw Jake out until he shaped up,

but if they threw Jake out, I couldn't imagine him figuring out how to shape up on his own.

On the other hand, I knew Annie's approach wouldn't work either.

Just continuing to love him and ignore what was happening wasn't going to change anything.

Thinking about Ed and Annie and Jake helped me clarify how I think about God's judgment and God's love.

So here's how I make sense of how God's judgment and God's love work together....

Basically there are 2 premises.

1. God is not a judge who is waiting to catch me doing something wrong so God can punish me. Rather God's judgment is sewn into the fabric of creation in threads of universal laws. When one of these universal laws is broken, there are consequences.

So for example, our bodies are designed as incredibly awesome machines,

and we are given the responsibility for keeping them running smoothly.

God has given me the freedom of choice to do anything I want with my body.

I can eat healthy food or junk. I can exercise or not.

Our parish nurse was concerned that my blood pressure was in the pre-high range.

I tried everything I could think of to lower it – with no result.

Then I tried going on a vegan diet, cutting out dairy products,

and within just a few weeks my blood pressure returned to normal levels.

I kept it up for about a month and then I slowly strayed off the path and went back to my old eating habits.

And my blood pressure went up again.

So if I don't change my behavior I could get sick.

It's not that God is punishing me;

it's just that God has designed our bodies

so that if we listen to them, pay attention to them, and respect and care for them, they will last longer than if we don't.

There are other universal laws as well, such as,

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

If you hurt someone else, you hurt yourself.

A few years ago, a friend said some things that hurt me, and out of my hurt I said something that hurt them.

And although we worked through the conflict,

the words we spoke can never be unspoken,

the hurt we caused each other will probably never be totally forgotten,

and there may always be a part of us that is afraid of being hurt once more.

Again, it's not that God is punishing me for the hurtful words I spoke out of my hurt.

It's simply that there were consequences to my behavior.

There are many universal laws sewn into the fabric of creation, like

“Give and it will be given to you.”

Whenever I'm in a financial crisis, my fear says I need to rein in my giving.

But I know that in God's universe if I cut back I will actually have less not more.

I know that generosity begets generosity.

So when I feel like I don't have enough to give, I give anyway.

And although there have been tough times, God has always brought me through.

Everything we do has consequences.

If we pollute the earth there will be consequences.

If we treat people who are different from us as less than us there will be consequences.

If we attack others we will bring attacks on ourselves.

So for me, God is not a laissez faire parent who lets us do what we want with no consequences.

God has already given us laws and explained what will happen if we break them.

On the other hand, God is not a hardline judging parent

who would throw us out on our ear and expect us to clean up our act on our own.

Instead, God sticks with us as we suffer the consequences of our mistakes, misdeeds, and misbehaviors.

Instead God is there to help us pick up the pieces of our lives and put them back together.

God is there to lead us from the places where we've found ourselves lost and alone

back to the place we belong.

God is there to bandage our wounds and offers rehabilitation so that we can once again function at our best.

The first premise is that it is not so much that God is a judge,

but that God has built universal laws into creation, laws which, if broken, lead to consequences.

And the second premise is that even when we are dealing with the consequences of our sin,

God is there to help us.

It took a while for Ed and Annie to find a way to help Jake,

but through family intervention they were able to find a middle way

between throwing Jake out or allowing his behavior to continue without any consequences.

There were consequences to Jake's behavior,

but God worked through his family and his church and 2 excellent counselors

to help Jake get his life back on track.

Every day you and I make umpteen decisions and every single decision we make has consequences.

That's the nature of the universe God has made.

Those consequences are often uncomfortable and in many cases downright painful

but the God in whom we believe is a God of boundless grace, never-ending mercy, and limitless love.

And that means that no matter what consequence we are now suffering,

God is right there beside us – loving us, supporting us, and leading us –

from darkness to light, from despair to hope, and from fear to faith.

Thanks be to God who brings us out of death into life. **Amen**