

Sermon for 17 September 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Exodus 14:19-31; Psalter: UMH 135 "Canticle of Moses and Miriam;" Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

"The preacher will be disturbed, of course, by the Matthean comment following the parable" (v. 35). We have grown accustomed to Matthew's manner of underscoring his point by making reference to a final judgment. But Matthew, in saying that God will likewise torture all who do not forgive from the heart, makes an appeal that falls short of effectiveness for most Christians. It is difficult to forgive 'from the heart' with such a threat hanging overhead. But sometimes conditions in a congregation can so deteriorate that the preacher speaks louder than usual and appeals to God's final judgment more frequently than usual. Such may be Matthew's situation."

Those are the closing words of the commentary on today's Gospel lesson. They're made by Fred Craddock, the Disciples of Christ pastor whose reflections have always struck home to me, both when heard him in person, and when I read them every week when I prepare to preach on the Gospel of Matthew.

Making allowance for his putting the pastor in the referee position of church arguments .... certainly the pastor's at fault as well as the laity, over the larger experience of churchmanship I've had ... what Craddock says rings true.

We don't get much solved by using God's final judgment in speaking about one another, do we?

Either we start and end with love, or we don't start or end at all. God's judgment has to be seen as a loving one, or we're not talking religion as I understand it, either in our line of it or any other line of the great historical traditions.

Let us pray.

Amen.