

“Love or justice—must we choose?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Hebrews 12:18-24, 28-29

By Rev. Patrick David Heery

Back in the day—and I mean like way back in the day, in the second century after Christ’s death—an early Christian theologian named Tertullian wrote:

“A better god has been discovered, who never takes offense, is never angry, never inflicts punishment, who has prepared no fire in hell, no gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness! He is purely and simply good. He... forbids all delinquency, but only in word. He is in you, if you are willing to pay him homage... for your fear he does not want.”

This “better god” Tertullian describes is a god, not of law, not of wrath, but of grace alone.

It is a compelling and beautiful divine portrait. For many of us, it sounds right. This is the God we believe in. There’s only one problem... it’s heresy.

Oh, heresy. It is one of the best parts of seminary, where you get a chance to learn all of those interesting and radical ideas they don’t teach in Sunday school.

In this particular heresy, Tertullian is speaking out against a heretic named Marcion. You see, Marcion came up with the idea that the God of the Old Testament was altogether different from the God of Jesus Christ. Marcion just couldn’t get over the stark differences between what he perceived as a fickle, wrathful, jealous God and the God whose love and mercy were revealed through Jesus.

He was left with but one conclusion: two different and irreconcilable gods—one of love and one of justice.

Driven by this vision, Marcion took a knife to Scripture, removing the entire Old Testament, all of the Gospels but Luke and all of the epistles but those written by Paul.

If you’ve ever caught yourself saying, “Oh, that’s not my God. That’s the God of the Old Testament,” then there might be a little Marcion in you.

And at first blush, it would appear that our Scripture passage this morning is in agreement. The author of Hebrews begins with a dramatic contrast. You may recognize the imagery: fire, darkness, tempest, trumpets, a voice that makes you tremble in fear. This is the God Moses encounters on Mount Sinai. It is the unapproachable, terrifying God who promises justice and death for those who break God’s laws.

But, says the author of Hebrews, this is not the God we have approached. No, instead of Mount Sinai and its terror, we have Mount Zion and a festal gathering of partying angels. Instead of death, we have a living God. Instead of judgment, we have a new covenant of forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

Sounds great, right? And I've got to be honest. A part of me would like to end the sermon here. Marcion has given us a chance to throw out all those troubling passages of Scripture and bask only in a God of grace.

There's a problem, though. And it's not just that Marcion was judged a heretic. Jesus, after all, was considered a heretic. The history of Christianity is full of competing ideas, and this plurality has made us stronger. We are called, like Jacob, to wrestle with God, grapple with mystery beyond our comprehension.

That's the problem. Marcion wants to make God simple, wants to reduce God to something comprehensible and palatable.

The author of Hebrews refuses to allow us to reduce God in this way. What begins as a clear contrast between a terrifying, violent God and a joyous, loving God is quickly muddied. Even in his cascade of beautiful images of grace, our author insists that God remains a judge (look... you'll see the word right there in the text). He speaks of awe before God—awe (a-w-e) which is reverence mixed with fear and wonder, the same kind of awe Moses had on Sinai. And then there are those last words: “for indeed our God is a consuming fire.”

What? Didn't the author, just a few verses earlier, say that God is *not* a fire?

Maybe our author is confused, or maybe he's telling us that we can't fit God neatly into our own constructs of language and logic.

Because the truth is that we need the God of Sinai, just as we need the God of Zion.

That God of the Old Testament, whom Marcion was so quick to erase, is the same God who fought on the side of the Israelites to liberate them from slavery; the same God who kissed the lips of Isaiah with fire and called forth the prophets. That judge and law-maker is the same God who created those laws to protect the weak and the poor, the widow and the orphan.

We need a God who doesn't just let someone hurt a child and get away with it. We need a God who stands up for the poor, which means standing against those who oppress them. We need a judge and defender who safeguards justice. We need to know that evil will not go unpunished.

We should be angry when our children of this earth are killed, are shackled by the violent arm of racism, patriarchy, and heterosexism, or are denied the education and healthcare and standard of living that others receive so easily. We should be angry, and so should God.

We need a God who is just. Marcion, of course, wasn't wrong to say that we need a God of love, a parent who stands ready and willing to forgive God's children. No. Where Marcion went wrong was in making us choose. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites... Power without love is reckless and abusive... love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.”

If Marcion had looked closer, he would have seen that the God of the Old Testament is as much a loving God as a just God. This beautiful image of Mount Zion, in our Scripture today, actually comes straight from Jewish apocalyptic tradition. In the same turn, Jesus—rooted in his Jewish identity—preached love and practiced forgiveness, while also overturning tables, calling out hypocrisy, and proclaiming freedom to the oppressed.

This isn't about choosing between a Jewish God and a Christian God. It's about standing in awe before a God more complex than we can fathom, taking our cue not from an either/or God but from a both/and God.

Let me repeat Dr. King: “Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.”

Justice is how God seeks to return humanity to ourselves. Justice is how God clears away everything that is not love. This is a God who justly will side with the victimized, will fight on their behalf, but who will do so, not only for their healing, but for the healing of their enemies as well. This is a God who transforms those who oppress into those who liberate.

We need this justly loving God because we need to know that the evil that's as much in us as it is in others will not forever stand between us and God. We need to know that we will be made clean. And so, our author tells us that God will shake heaven and earth, will rain down justice, but we shall enter into a place, the very presence of God, and that place will not be destroyed.

It's sort of like how when my son Emerson does something he's not supposed to, like throwing a toy at mommy's head, or slamming a door, or hitting one of the dogs, or shoving a rock into his mouth—yes, we are in the terrible twos—I don't just let him do whatever he wants. He needs boundaries, consequences—for his own sake, as well as ours. I put him in timeout. Justice! But when the timeout is over, I hug him, forgive him, and remind him how much I love him.

So, what does this look like for us right now in the face of something far worse: white supremacy and hate, violence and inequality? Well, remember what Dr. King said: “Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.” For me, that means standing with Jesus on the side of Black and Brown persons who are fighting for their right to live. It means centering voices of color, honoring what they have to say; no debate, no “Yeah buts...”, just listening. It means confronting and dismantling every policy, every leader, every speech, every behavior—including my own—that hurts Black and Brown Lives. But it also means doing so with a very clear goal: to see humanity restored, for everyone. By denying humanity to others, white supremacists cut themselves off from their own humanity. I would see them loved back into humanity, and because I know that can't happen until they are freed of their hate and their violence, I will root out their hate and violence like poison from a wound—not to destroy them, but to save them. To save everyone.

That's what God wants: to save us. And to do that, God is both justice and grace. But thankfully, God's a little more grace. **Amen.**

P.S. If this sermon has inspired you to take a fresh look at the Old Testament, we have just the opportunity for you. Shavonn Lynch this summer is leading a class that invites us to rediscover the Old Testament and its God of both love and justice. She is offering an introduction today over Zoom at 1 pm. To join us, email Shavonn or me, or just post a comment here, and we'll send you the link. If you can't make it today, but are still interested in the upcoming classes, let us know.