

Gracie's Sermon

Will you pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When it comes to eternal judgement, the Bible is pretty clear about who is in charge. From the prophet Amos telling us if we seek good, "the Lord... will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph," to Paul explaining that both master and slave "have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality," God is the one responsible for judging our behavior. Humans are clearly not up to the task of evaluating other humans and deciding who gets to live a better life. But this doesn't mean we don't try.

When I was in eighth grade, I watched Michael Moore's movie *Where to Invade Next*, and for the first time was confronted with the contrast between America's vast network of prison cells and isolation chambers and the rehabilitative approach to punishment taken in Norway, where they allowed a murderer to perfect his cooking skills and, yes, even wield a knife. There, they gave inmates keys to access all of the facilities, and nowhere was an armed guard to be found. Meanwhile, about 77% of people released from prison in the US will be arrested again within 5 years, compared with only about 20% in Norway.

As I learned more, I found that indigenous communities in North America had practices dating back far before Norway's that brought offenders and victims together in what we might call restorative justice. For example, the M'n-JI-kaning first nation, located in Ontario, has a practice called Biidaaban which encourages people who have caused harm to take responsibility, and brings looking in to the future (bii) with experiencing the présent (daa) and taking accountability for the past (ban). This allows the whole community to hold offenders accountable. To the contrary, today, America does its best to keep its prisons irrelevant and hidden from the average middle class white person.

Nevertheless, being brought up in America, I still learned that prison was a place for an irredeemable person-- someone who had gone wrong and wasn't coming back. The thought of trusting these convicted felons with autonomy jolted my sense of justice, and forced me to consider the people our prison system was failing. In Michelle Alexander's *New Jim Crow*, she explains how being Black in America means fighting a system meant to oppress you, and navigating the remnants of slave patrols in the policing systems of today. For example, a Black man in America is 6x more likely to be incarcerated than a white man, but no more likely to commit a crime. As I've learned more about this it is becoming clear that the American prisons are not only stripping people of their freedom and humanity, but actively tearing apart communities, and throwing away human potential instead of cultivating success.

Meanwhile, Christians have justified human rights abuses for millenia by saying Black people are “cursed,” “descendents of Ham.” While the bloody legacy of people’s misinterpretation of the story of Noah and Ham gives tangible proof of how humans are unqualified to cast judgement on others, the good news is this is a call to action for us to truly embody the faith the Bible expects of us and to leave the permanent judgement to God. To do otherwise is not only cruel, but in direct violation of the Biblical commandment that God determines our worth, not our own flawed systems. The story of Noah and Ham gives us a lesson: it is a stark example of how our fallacy of “judgement” is doomed to become oppression and subjugation because of our biases, so the only acceptable action is to leave the judging to God.

Today, we can look to systems like the one in Norway for inspiration, and systems like biidaaban to eventually be able to see each other's humanity, rather than judging another's worst moment, and create a space where healing can happen.

Ellie’s Sermon

Leaving all the judgement to God is an important lesson to be used in more instances than one. In a world full of biases, unreliable reporting, and partisan politics, it’s nearly impossible to deem anything as fair. Seeking justice has become a collective effort, as all generations, from Gracie and I to the oldest members of Old South, navigate what it means to be a faithful Christian. However, the justice system shouldn’t dictate to whom God can present his abundant opportunities.

As my high school years come to an end and college is looming in the coming months, I have begun to think about how my new classmates might judge me. As I meet new people, they won’t know anything about my past, only the person I have become with the help of family, friends, the Old South community, and God. I have lived in the same apartment my whole life, only changing schools twice from pre-k to senior year, and have (gladly) attended the same church since I was little. I am so grateful for all these experiences, but after a 17-year cycle of similar routines, curfews, and friend groups, I’m ready for some new firsts. There’s not much on my “record” (only if you don’t count the time I skipped class “by mistake”), but I am still granted a fresh start where I have the freedom to reinvent myself without anyone thinking twice about it.

Unfortunately, far too many people are denied an opportunity like this thanks to our corrupted justice system. Ex-convicts should be able to vote, get a job, and be granted access to basic human rights that everyone deserves. Low income families should have social mobility by means of college or a good high school education. Minorities deserve the same treatment as those with white or white-passing skin. In Jeremiah 29:11 the

Bible says, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope”. If you ever feel stagnant in your work, personal, or social life, know that God has a plan for you and wants to present you with new opportunities. If we seek to reform our justice system and refrain from being judgemental in our everyday lives, the firsts, fresh starts, and new beginnings that everyone craves, will be available to all.