

Rev. Danny Mackey  
First Sunday after Trinity (Father's Day)  
June 19, 2022  
1 John 4:16–21  
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment.*

When I was about 10 years old, my brother Zach and I went over to a neighbor kid's house. His name was Jason. Jason lived with his mom and her parents. His dad wasn't really in the picture. And Jason got into a lot of trouble. The trouble that day involved a trash-filled garbage can, a box of matches, and some lighter fluid. The three of us set that trash on fire, watching the flames get bigger and higher with every squeeze of lighter fluid. And then there was a POP! An aerosol can was at the bottom of the trash. And when it got too hot, it popped, exploding open, knocking that garbage can over. Zach and I ran, leaving Jason with a pile of fiery garbage scattered in the alleyway. His grandma running out of the house.

We ran home, through the backdoor, and upstairs to our room. We were shaking, we were so scared. What if Jason told on us? What if his grandma saw us? What would dad do? Surely, we'd get the belt. Maybe worse. Our imaginations imagined worse. Zach was crying. Together we huddled at the top of the stairs, in the dark.

Then the phone rang. We heard mom's voice. Then dad's. Then mom hollered for us to come downstairs. We shook with fear. I was crying now, too. We went to face our father's anger.

This is how people are with God. They're afraid of Him. They've done something wrong—even something they knew was wrong while they were doing it—and they're afraid He'll punish them. After all, they deserve to be punished.

At least, that's how I viewed God. God as some big, mean Judge. Always with His do this, don't do that. And I was always messing up. I couldn't make Him happy. No way He'd be proud of me. I got in too many fights with my brothers and the neighbor kids. I cussed with my friends, using words I'd heard my older brothers say but didn't know what they meant. I stole some of my mom's dimes she used for playing cards with her friends so I could go down to Little Bucky's and buy candy. I even stole a candy bar or two from the Super America gas station on the corner. And I looked at dirty magazines my brother had given me. And as I got older, I did much worse. I knew I was breaking the Ten Commandments.

And I knew God wasn't happy with me. I wasn't happy with me, either. My conscience wouldn't let me be.

So I was miserable. Or, at least, I alternated between being miserable and wallowing in my misery. In for a penny, in for a pound. If I was going to go to hell for sinning, I might as well sin big. If God was going to damn me, then I'd at least have some fun. But then I'd feel miserable again. I was scared of judgment. The nuns made hell sound terrifying. Burning for all eternity? No, thank you. I didn't want to go to hell, but I didn't know if I wanted to be good enough to avoid it. While I was afraid of my dad and his punishment for but a few minutes, my fear of God's punishment was always with me.

Maybe you don't know how that feels. Sometimes I get the impression that Lutherans have it pretty easy. They're constantly told that God loves them. They're offered forgiveness without them needing to make restitution or do some act of penance. That wasn't the case with Martin Luther, though. He saw God as this unrelenting, ever-demanding Judge. Dr. Luther once wrote:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Luther says he hated God. His fear made Luther hate God.

Isn't this how it is with so many? Consider the atheists. So many of them rail against God, calling Him evil. So many are angry with God, wondering why God allows or perhaps causes bad things to happen. Many aren't really atheists. They're actually angry theists.

If the angry theists looked at our Gospel lesson, they might point out Lazarus's condition. How could God allow a good man like Lazarus to be treated so horribly while the rich man prospered? The disparity between the two men's condition is so great—the one starving while the other feasts, one clothed in rags while the other in royal attire—that God must not exist. At least, not any God worth worshipping.

And so some even get to the point where they despise God and brazenly parade their sin before Him and the world. They don't seem to fear God at all, thinking that He's somehow beneath their notice. Like God is somehow beholden to them.

Last Saturday, Brenda and I were out to dinner at Flatwater in Broad Ripple. Great restaurant. And we overheard a gal talking about Father's Day. (Oh, Happy Father's Day to all our dads!) And she was wondering out loud about whether or not she should get her dad a card or gift. Then she said something about how she wasn't sure if he deserved it. She said he was kind of being a jerk lately.

I mention this because this is how people are so often with God, too. Some are terrified of His punishing them. Others think of God as beholden to them. I'll love God if He treats me how I want. Right? But what if this went the other way? What if her dad decided not to acknowledge her birthday or get her some gift because he thought she was being kind of a jerk lately? Fearing God's punishment is closer to the kingdom than being so arrogant that you think He's beholden to you. Because hell is real. And, as we heard in our Gospel lesson, God can and does send people—people like the rich man, who neither love God nor their neighbor—God can and does send people there.

But fear is the beginning of wisdom. Not the end. And love that's been perfected casts out fear.

When Zach and I got downstairs, my dad was furious. But it was a strange fury. He didn't yell, like usual. He did have his belt out. It was sitting on the table, but he wasn't near it. He had us sit down. My parents had heard the pop of the aerosol can, it was that loud. Now, they knew the sound's cause. He looked us over. Asked to see our hands and arms. I think he was looking for burns. He asked about our hearing. He asked if we were okay. We were crying so hard we had snot running down our chins. It was gross. We sniveled in terror. He asked whose idea the fire was. We said Jason's. He said something like, "I'm not going to whip you. But your mom and I have to decide your punishment. Go back to your room." We ran back upstairs.

We got grounded. I don't remember how long. And we weren't allowed to hang out with Jason anymore. But first we had to go back over and see the damage and why it was so dangerous and apologize to Jason's grandparents.

My dad didn't want us to get hurt. We scared him. He knew a few welts would heal up. But if we had gotten burned, if something happened to our hearing, or if something worse happened... My dad was scared at the thought. Why? Because he loved us. He loved us more

than we loved him. Because we didn't love him as we ought—that's why we were so afraid of him.

We might be afraid of God. Afraid that He'll punish us and send us to hell. But that fear is born out of our hatred of God. Much like a slave fears his owner. But we are rather to regard God as our heavenly Father. And then what we feel toward Him isn't so much fear but reverence and honor. We might not understand what He's doing to us at the time, but we can trust that it's for our good. We can trust He disciplines us because He loves us, not because He is punishing us.

That's because our love for God is perfected in His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus has already taken the punishment for sin—everything we've ever done wrong, whether as a child or an adult, whether willfully or in ignorance. Jesus took the just punishment for sin, all of it, on the cross. He knows what hell is like. He went through it on the cross. Jesus experienced that separation from God and from all that is good. Weeping and gnashing of teeth. Not a single drop of water to cool the tongue.

And because Jesus took our punishment—and the punishment of all people—we know that God isn't punishing people in this world. (Though we may want Him to.) Rather, God is doing something different. Our suffering—and the suffering of others—isn't punishment. It's discipline. It's an act of fatherly love. Because the Father loves all His creatures, He disciplines them. Even those who don't love Him. His goal is to turn us back to Him, so that we can escape all harm and be with Him forever.

This is what happened with Dr. Luther (and with me, I dare say). He recounts how God worked in him through the Word:

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven....

If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon His fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see Him rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across His face.

Dr. Luther no longer saw God as a harsh Judge bent on sending him to hell. Rather, he saw God as full of love and favor, and who opens heaven's gates to all who would enter.

As a result, Luther learned compassion and empathy for his fellow sinners. He grew to better understand those struggling with their consciences and how to comfort them. The love and grace of God taught him to likewise love and give grace to those he encountered. That's what our Epistle lesson is about. God's love overflowing us and onto others. Our suffering and problems are being used by God to teach us to better love others. Because God loves them, just as He loves us.

We learn not to speak with judgment and animosity, but with God's wisdom and love. No matter whom we encounter, we know that that person is precious in the sight of God. Because, just like He did for us, Jesus took that person's punishment on the cross. That's right. None need experience hell. While some do because they don't want what Jesus did for them, it doesn't change the fact that He did it for them. Yet He won't force them to receive His gift. Just like the Rich Man. Still He sends His Word—Moses and the Prophets, and also the Apostles and Evangelists so that they might hear and believe.

St. John who wrote these words suffered, too. His fellow apostles were martyred decades earlier. Perhaps he had survivor's guilt. He was exiled. His heart broke as so many of his relatives and countrymen rejected Jesus as the Messiah. He could've become bitter and hateful of them. But this letter proves otherwise. He loved them as a father, learning love from the heavenly Father and His Son.

St. John reached out to them, trying to convince them of the love of God the Father in Christ Jesus, our Lord. John sought to convince them (and us) that they need not fear punishment, because that punishment was taken on the cross.

And all that is left is love. God's love for them. And because God first loved, we love. We love God and love one another. This is true love, a love that doesn't demand its own way but makes a way for the heavenly Father to be together with us. A love of one laying down His life for us. A love that takes away all punishment, and so takes away that slavish fear. And all we are left with is reverence for God our Father and love toward our neighbor.

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ + Jesus.