

- ✘ [1 John 4:16]"God is love." That's a difficult concept for me.
 - ✓ Perhaps it's the result of having a German mother, and in my understanding of German God, God is not so much Love, but instead, God is Judge.
 - And even if German God is Love, He seemed to spend a lot of his day keeping track of what I was doing
 - And even though German God is Love, he seems to have taken on that characteristic only by delegating the Judge role to his Son.
 - We're reminded of that every time we say the Creed: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead."
- ✘ So, if it's a given that Jesus Christ will judge the living and the dead,
 - ✓ How do God and Jesus judge us? ...and
 - ✓ What's love got to do with it.
- ✘ TO answer that I turn to the experience of a former Jesuit priest, Dennis Linn, who had a real revelation about Judgment & the Love of God during a counseling session with one of the ladies in his parish¹.
- ✘ One day Hilda came to Fr. Linn crying because her son had tried to commit suicide for the fourth time. She told me that he was involved in prostitution, drug dealing and murder. She ended her list of her son's "big sins" with, "What bothers me most is that my son says he *wants nothing to do with God*."
 - ✓ *What will happen to my son if he commits suicide without repenting and wants nothing to do with God?"*
 - Since at the time Dennis's image of God was like God as Supreme Judge, he thought, "God will probably send your son to hell."
 - But he didn't want to tell Hilda that. Instead his many years of theological training had taught him what to do when he didn't know how to answer a difficult theological question: ask the other person, "*What do you think?"*"
 - ✓ "Well," Hilda responded, "I think that when you die, you appear before the judgment seat of God. If you have lived a good life, God will send you to heaven. If you have lived a bad life, God will send you to hell." Sadly, she concluded, "Since my son has lived such a bad life, if he were to die without repenting, God would *certainly send him to hell*."
 - Although Dennis tended to agree with her, he didn't want to say, "Right on, Hilda! Your son would probably be sent to hell." He was again grateful for

¹ Dennis Linn; Sheila Fabricant Linn; Matthew Linn. *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God* (Kindle Locations 69-71). Kindle Edition.

his theological training which taught him a second strategy: when you when you *don't know how to solve a theological problem, then let God solve it.*

- So I said to Hilda, "Close your eyes. Imagine that you are sitting next to the judgment seat of God. Imagine also that your son has died with all these serious sins and without repenting. He has just arrived at the judgment seat of God. Squeeze my hand when you can imagine that."
- A few minutes later Hilda squeezed his hand. She described to me the entire judgment scene.
 - ◆ Then Dennis asked her, "Hilda, how does your son feel?" Hilda answered, "My son feels so lonely and empty."
 - ◆ He asked Hilda what she would like to do. She said, "I want to throw my arms around my son." She lifted her arms and began to cry as she imagined herself holding her son tightly. Finally, when she had stopped crying, Fr. Dennis asked her to look into God's eyes and watch what God wanted to do.
 - ◆ God stepped down from the throne, and just as Hilda did, embraced Hilda's son. And the three of them, Hilda, her son and God, cried together and held one another.
- ✓ And in that instant of time Fr. Dennis' understanding of God was completely turned around.
 - Yes, *God is love.*
 - *And God loves us at least as much as the person who loves us the most.*
 - God loves us at least as *much as Hilda loved her son* or at least as much as *I love my son and daughter.*
- ✗ Sadly, however—unlike Hilda—there are parents out there who see themselves as the Agents of God's Vengeful Judgment.
- ✓ It would take at least two handfuls to count the number of young women I've met over the past few years, who found themselves pregnant and were thrown out of their homes.
 - The words of one irate parent: "I will have no bastard kids in my house. You are no longer my daughter. I do not know you. You are dead to me."
 - She had only worked up enough courage to tell the parents this at 10 PM; when she called looking for help so she could stay at a motel.
- ✗ That was when I realized that *people become like the God they worship.*

- ✓ If we believe in a God of Vengeful Justice, we understand God as one who sits on his throne and *grades* the mistakes and errors of others
- ✓ And if Vengeful God did not like what he saw, he could put those persons out of sight and out of mind by sending them into hell....*and that will solve everything.*
- ✓ And if even God can turn his back on people and send them into eternal hell, then parents can turn their backs on their own children and send them out into the night, or nuke Iran, or impose the death penaltyi....*and that will solve everything*
- ✗ But this is *not the Good News of Jesus Christ*
 - ✓ If we believe that “God is Love” then I believe that we no longer see God as a Judge but as a healer.
 - Judges can determine guilt or innocence, but they cannot heal a person.
 - ✓ Again and again in the Gospels Jesus *refuses to take on the role as a Vengeful judge, but instead he acts as the healer, the one who expresses perfect love:* (here’s just two)
 - The story of the *adulterous woman*, Jesus does point out the woman’s behavior, but he stands by her side as a person.
 - The story of Paul on the Damascus Road, when Jesus asks, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”
 - If Jesus were a Vengeful God, Jesus killing Paul would have been a happy ending to the story for many persecuted Christians at the time...*and that would have solved everything*
 - But Jesus didn’t do that; *he loved Paul and healed him....and that did solve everything.*
- ✗ And the *Good News* in the story of the Adulterous Woman and Saul on the Road to Damascus, (and other stories of Jesus)
 - ✓ Is **not** this: “*God loves the repentant sinner.*”
 - ✓ The **real** Good News is this: “*God loves the unrepentant sinner.*”
 - It is *not the case that we first repent and then God loves us.* It’s just the opposite.
 - *Paul repented only when God loved and healed him while he was still an unrepentant murderer and persecutor of Christians.*
- ✗ This *doesn’t mean that repentance* for the evil we have done is not important.

- The only reason that we are able to move from unrepentance to repentance is that *God's healing and forgiveness came first.*
 - ♦ *1 John 4:19: We love because [God] first loved us."*
- ✘ And I also believe that it is possible for someone to be *unrepentant even unto death*, and that person may still experience the love of God and the healing power of God...and that person may still have the opportunity to repent after death.
 - ✓ This is an item of faith held by the Eastern Orthodox Church (Serge Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 1935)
 - ✓ It is alluded to in the BCP: (I): *We pray for all who have died in the hope of the resurrection, and for all the departed."* (Why pray for the dead, if they are beyond hope?)
 - ✓ Nowhere in the NT does it state that after death there is no 2nd chance.
- ✘ All this doesn't mean that Jesus will ignore our wrongdoing.
 - ✓ Jesus does *tell Paul that he's done wrong* in persecuting Christians.
 - ✓ But Jesus also seems to understand that *we humans often act out of ignorance* and out of thinking that this is what is *expected* of us as good citizens or *faithful believers* or as *good soldiers*.
- ✘ The ultimate statement of Jesus as healer rather than Vengeful Judge comes at his final words on the cross.
 - ✓ The cross points out *two great realities*:
 - 1. That *left to our own devices and our vengeful understanding of God*, we are capable of the most profound evil
 - 2. Despite all that, Jesus *stands by the side of even unrepentant murderers when he says*, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Lk 23:34)