

The Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

AS GOD SEES
Sermon for Epiphany Last B – Mk 9:1-16
LPC, 2/15/15

What do you think about Brian Williams—the TV newsman who is accused of lying about his experience of being under fire in Afghanistan? You must have an opinion. Everyone seems to have an opinion.

Judging from the number of news items, day by day, of celebrities falling from grace, it would appear that the American public likes nothing better than to see the mighty tumble from their exalted positions. It's hard not to see a certain amount of gloating going on in the popularity of such stories.

Here's an interesting question, though: how does God see those who fall from grace? Does God take the same satisfaction we do when the haughty, the dishonest, the corrupt or the cruel meet their comeuppance?

We Christians believe that God is both just and merciful. Justice demands that people take responsibility for their wrong actions. Mercy is forgiving, and takes nuances into account. God can be both just and merciful at the same time, but it seems difficult for us humans to follow God's example.

For us, justice frequently requires not just the taking of responsibility and the making of reparations, but also punishment for misdeeds. Living in society, we have to be concerned with the consequences of crime and sin. If the criminal or sinner is not punished, what prevents him or her from further mischief? And what about setting an example? We want other people to know that crime, or lying, or cheating, or stealing, *or worse*, doesn't pay.

I don't pretend to know how we humans should balance justice and mercy. It's clearly complicated when we are so desperately concerned with maintaining both order and freedom in human society. What I'd like to suggest is that we wrestle with the concepts of justice and mercy in the light of what we believe about God.

Because balancing justice and mercy is so difficult for us, many of us lean one way or the other in our concept of God. For some of us the God of judgment prevails in our imaginations. There is plenty of biblical support for this view. The angry God of the Old Testament wipes out entire populations for their sin and apostasy. Jesus himself speaks of a final, apocalyptic judgment. Later tradition bears this out. Jonathan Edwards wrote of "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God." Protestants and Catholics alike have burdened their children with guilt for every impure thought, or for just enjoying themselves too much.

The pendulum has swung back in recent years. We now tone down our talk of sin even in church. We remove phrases like "miserable offenders," from our prayers. The prevailing attitude in many quarters has shifted to "I'm OK, you're OK," and morality is

The Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

all relative. God is a warm, woolly blanket and we can do whatever we want without fear of divine retribution.

Now both of these extremes are slightly ridiculous. But it is also true that whichever way we lean in our conception of God, our deepest, unspoken beliefs about God tend to play out in our attitudes and actions, and these attitudes and actions may not reflect what we say we believe about God.

For example, we can claim to believe in a merciful God, but if we act very judgmental toward our neighbors, doesn't that belie what we say we believe? On the other hand, we can claim to believe in a God of justice, but if we stand aside when other peoples' rights and freedoms are compromised, do not our actions speak louder than words?

Do we want God to be merciful with us, but scrupulously just with everybody else? I'm not sure it works that way. If God demands justice of others, God will demand justice of us. If God shows mercy to us, God must show mercy to others.

We'd better hope that God is merciful to Brian Williams. Not only for his sake, but for ours.

Once again, I cannot offer the perfect recipe for justice and mercy in our own behavior. I'm not smart enough. A lot of you probably have more experience than I in grappling with these issues. I only suggest that these are indeed issues to grapple with, keeping in mind and heart the probability that God does not see as we see.

Now we get glimpses from time to time of what God sees. Many of these glimpses are revealed in the Bible. We get one such glimpse today. Jesus is on the mountaintop with Peter and James and John, and he suddenly starts to glow with heavenly radiance. Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, also appear. A celestial voice proclaims, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Then only Jesus remains, showing that Jesus even holds precedence over the Law and the Prophets.

The disciples are terrified to get a glimpse of how God sees. Their imaginations are too small. Seeing Jesus as the transfigured Son of God will not make sense to them until Jesus has risen from the dead.

And so it is with us. We will not be able to understand many truths about God until the resurrection. We will not understand how God balances justice and mercy until the resurrection.

In the meantime, in humility for our imperfect understanding, we pray for God's direction in working for justice. And we allow our gratitude for the mercy God has shown to us to color and guide the mercy we show to others.