

In February of 1986 Paul House received his judgment: he was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death.

Paul was new to Luttrell, a small town northeast of Knoxville, when the investigation began. He had just moved there from Utah -- with his criminal record in tow. This out-of-towner with a record was one of the first people authorities brought in for questioning. Witnesses said they'd seen him wiping his hands near the scene of the crime. The police found jeans with what looked like bloodstains in Paul's hamper, and later an expert testified that blood on the jeans matched the victim's. The jury took four hours to deliberate, then judged that Paul had committed the crime and sentenced him to death.

That was 1986. Ten years later, in 1996, a new defense lawyer was brought to the case to help with Paul's appeal. He found two new witnesses, who said they'd heard someone else confess to the crime. In 1998 DNA testing pointed to that same confessor. In 1999 a medical examiner deemed that the blood found on Paul's jeans had gotten there long after the crime had been committed; and because a significant amount of the blood taken from the scene of the crime as evidence was missing from the vials after being transported to the lab with the other evidence (back in the 80s), his theory was that the blood had spilled while evidence was being transported, and that's how it had gotten on Paul's jeans. In 2005 the Supreme Court ruled that, had the original jury known about the new DNA evidence, they would never have found Paul guilty, and the court ordered a new trial. It was not until three years later, in 2008, that Paul was released on bond, and it took almost another year -- and further DNA evidence -- for the prosecution to drop the case. Paul spent 22 1/2 years in prison, and at one point he had been just five days away from execution.<sup>1</sup>

Paul House was the 132<sup>nd</sup> person to be freed from death row in the U.S. since 1973. Now the number is higher than 150.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Haas, "From death row to freedom: One Tennessee man's journey," *The Tennessean*, May 3, 2014. Available online: <http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/2014/05/03/death-row-to-freedom-paul-house/8577781/> Accessed July 20, 2017.

"Paul House," *The Innocence Project*. Available online: <https://www.innocenceproject.org/cases/paul-house/> Accessed July 20, 2017.

<sup>2</sup>"Innocence," *Tennesseans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty*, available online: <http://tennesseedeathpenalty.org/the-facts/innocence/> Accessed July 20, 2017.

"The slaves said to [the master], 'Then do you want us to go and gather [the weeds and pull them from the wheat field]?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.'"

The first half of Jesus's parable of the wheat and the weeds points to our human inability to judge perfectly. Paul House's story and the many others like it remind us that even in carefully-crafted systems, full of trained experts and scientific study and juries and checks and balances...even then our judgment is imperfect. We make mistakes, or we lack evidence, or biases that we may not even be aware of affect our judgment unfairly.

We know this personally, too, this pattern of judging wrongly or unfairly. Sometimes the judgment is quick and has no effect except in our own minds: *That guy looks so grumpy; he must be a jerk. That lady cut me off; does she even know how to drive?* At other times we act on our judgments, and then later we regret the way they hurt someone else or changed a relationship. Many people carry the burden of being judged unfairly over and over, because of their skin color or their age or their gender or the size of their bank account or their accent. We judge people after one quick expression of their political or religious views, and then it's hard to see the person over our judgment. We are missing pieces of a story, or we are lied to, and then we accuse a friend who is innocent. We misjudge people and situations all the time.

The parable seems to say we shouldn't be making the judgments because of that very danger: you'll pull out the wheat along with the weeds! You'll outcast good people along with the bad!

But remember: parables always simplify. Aesop's parable of the ant and the grasshopper teaches us that when we work hard, we will have what we need to survive. A good lesson. But in real life there are complications: some people work and work, and still barely make it by; and if all we do is work, we'll probably burn out eventually. Jesus's parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8) teaches us that we "should pray always and not give up" and seems to imply that if we just pray enough, we'll get what we're asking for; but we know that in real life the answers to our prayers are much more complicated than that.

This parable of the wheat and the weeds seems to tell us that we shouldn't judge, because we'll just mess it up. But we know that we need to make judgments. We need to protect ourselves and those around us from danger. We need to decide whom we trust, and with how much of our selves. We need to call out the sin we see in the hopes that we can stop it. We need to be judged ourselves, sometimes, so that we can make better choices. We need to weed out the misinformation and the lies and the spin from the facts. We want the good to win and the evil to lose. And so we judge -- even imperfectly -- because we have to. We try our best.

We long for perfect judgment as part of our longing for justice and a perfect world. That's why the stories of a messiah are almost always the story of a judge, the

Great Judge, coming to right the wrongs of the world. To, as pregnant Mary sang, “scatter the proud,” “[bring] down the powerful and [lift] up the lowly,” to “[fill] the hungry with good things.” The hope for the messiah has always been the hope for the one who comes to judge the greedy rulers and the wrongdoers for the sake of the oppressed and the victims, the one who will make those judgments in perfect righteousness.

So this parable sounds frightening at first: “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” But maybe we can find some good news or even comfort in those words when we remember what they mean: the perfect judge is coming, and his judgments will satisfy our longing for justice and peace and an end to wrongdoing. We won’t have to rely on our own flawed judgments anymore; instead our world will be judged by the God who has all the information, who understands every complicating factor, and who always judges rightly.

And we need to remember what I’ve said already in this sermon: parables always simplify. It sounds so black-and-white to say, “God will separate the sinners and the righteous, and throw out all the sinners.” And *that’s* a scary thought: Am I a sinner, or am I righteous?

But we know from our own efforts at judgment that separating the sinner from the saint is much more complicated than that. The criminal is usually also a victim. A person who commits one sin might have ten other righteous habits. And even Mother Teresa gets criticized sometimes for the ways she did her saintly work.

As Lutherans we hold the complicated -- but I think very accurate -- belief that we are all both 100% sinner and 100% saint. We are sinners for the many reasons we all know well, and we are saints because the Holy Spirit is at work in us, directing our hearts and minds toward God, helping us to choose the good, and, most importantly, washing and re-washing us in grace.<sup>3</sup>

So maybe it’s like this field of wheat and weeds is something inside each of us: that God is at work in each of us to separate our wheat from our weeds, and on the Last Day that task will finally be complete.

But however we interpret this parable, it’s most important that we remember that we believe that God does not judge for the sake of judging. The judging is just one part of the movement of grace.

Lutheran teaching says that the Law -- the parts of God’s Word that make us feel judged -- is ultimately for our own benefit. The Law helps to curb wrongdoing. The Law guides us to live in ways that please God and bless ourselves and others.

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<sup>3</sup> For more info: “What are the three uses of God’s Law?” *The Lutheran Layman*. Available online: <http://www.lutheranlayman.com/2014/02/what-are-three-uses-of-gods-law.html> Accessed July 20, 2017

And when the Law condemns our actions, it reminds us to turn to God's mercy and grace.

This parable of the wheat and the weeds might at first seem out of place with our usual image of Jesus as the one who came to show love and mercy. But when we remember that we do long for righteous judgment, and when we trust that God is not only righteous and fair, but most of all full of grace and compassion, then we can trust that even God's judgment will be an act of grace that will bless us and our world.

Let us pray.

*O God, we thank you for the promise to one day perfect our world through your perfect judgment and for the ways that you already work in us and through us to build your kingdom here. Guide us as we make judgments, that we would be wise, and that even our judgments would be part of your work of grace, until that great day when your grace is made complete. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.*