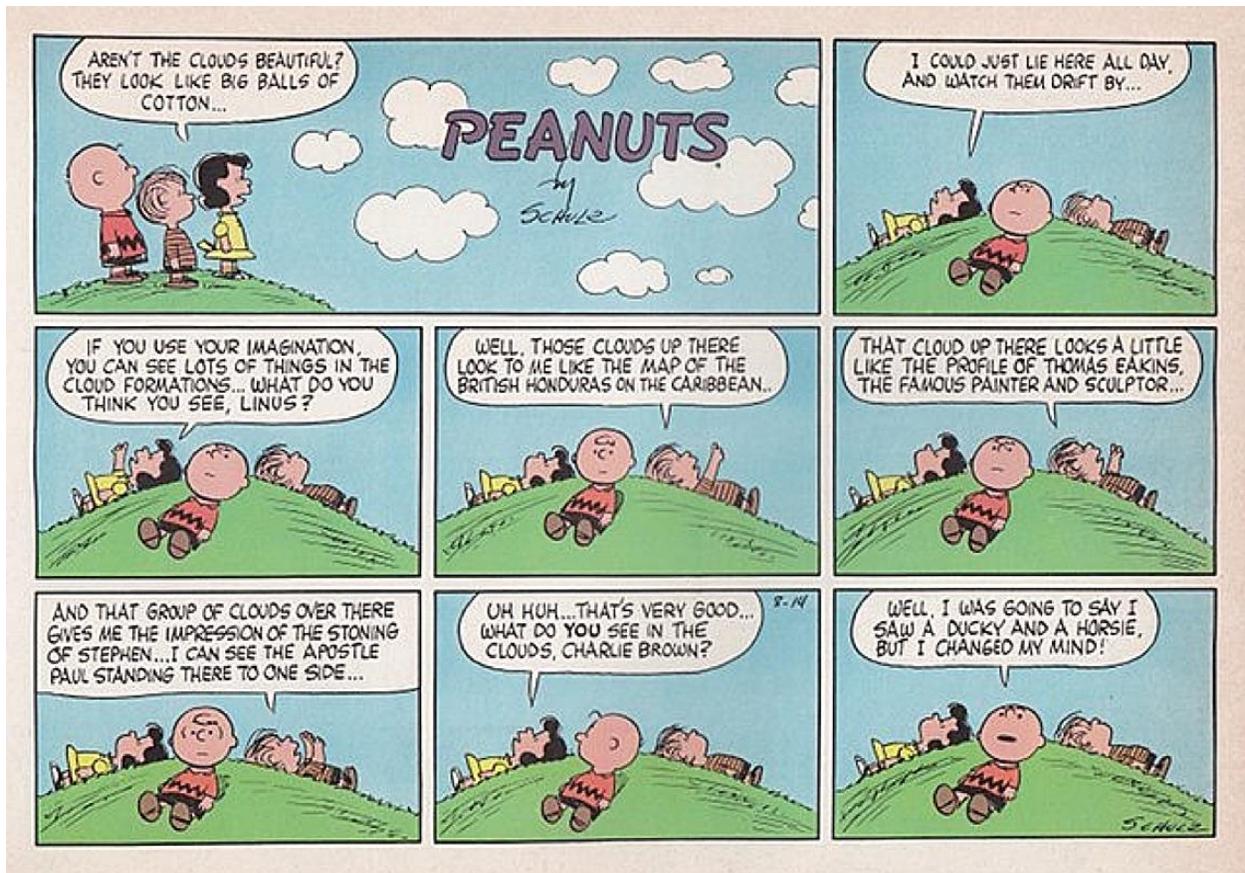


There's an old Peanuts cartoon where Lucy and Linus and Charlie Brown are lying on the grass looking at the clouds.



Lucy says, "Aren't the clouds beautiful? They look like big balls of cotton. I could just lie here all day and watch them drift by. If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud formations. What do you think you see, Linus?"

"Well, those clouds up there look like the map of the British Honduras on the Caribbean. That cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor. And that group of clouds over there gives me the impression of the stoning of Stephen. I can see the apostle Paul standing there to one side..."

"Uh huh. That's very good. What do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?"

"Well, I was going to say I saw a ducky and a horsie, but I changed my mind!"

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With a little imagination, you can see a lot of things in the shapes of the clouds, but for some people, when they look at clouds, they see something altogether different. I have a friend who teaches meteorology at the University of North Carolina. Thirty years ago, she was a part of my church youth group, but when she was working on her PhD, she was a storm chaser. One of those crazy folks in a pick-up truck with equipment and cameras racing after tornados all across the Midwest, hoping to discover something new about how things work.

When Casey looks at the clouds she sees cumulus, nimbus, cirrus and stratus and all their different variations. She sees what's coming because she knows the language of the clouds. She can see things that you and I would notice and she makes her living teaching others how to read the clouds as well.

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We all like to know what's coming next. Some of us more than others, and yet, when Jesus was on earth, he had some words of caution for people who spent too

much time trying to figure out the future. He'd been trying to get his followers to understand that they needed to pay attention to what was going on around them. It's been the stuff of our lessons for the last several weeks.

- ✓ Be watchful. Be wise.
- ✓ Pay attention.
- ✓ Be faithful in your calling. Don't fall asleep on the job. You never know when the master will return.
- ✓ Don't worry about stuff- what you will wear or what you will eat. God will take care of you. Instead concern yourself with caring for others and sharing the good news.

Jesus told his friends, ""When you see a cloud rising in the west, you can tell that it's going to rain- and it does! And when you see the south wind blowing, you know there will be scorching heat; and it happens. You silly people! You know how to interpret the clouds and the winds- but you don't know how to interpret the really important things that are going on around you."

In the verses that follow our text for today, he says to those who are gathered, "Can't you see what's right and what's wrong? Can't you tell the difference?"

"Imagine you're being sued," he said. "You and your accuser are on your way to court. Wouldn't you do everything in your power to settle out of court before you end up talking to the District Attorney? After all, he might drag you to stand before the judge, and the judge might hand you over to the police, and they might throw you in jail. Once you're in jail, it's too late: you're not going anywhere until your debt is paid in full."

In other words, once again, "you are spending too much time worrying about the wrong things. So straighten up and fly right!"

We can read all kinds of signs about the weather, politics, the economy, you name it. There are television channels dedicated to trying to figure it all out. The Weather Channel, CNN, Bloomsburg. If it is important to our physical survival, we'll study it, write about it and publish a book. But can we read the signs about our spiritual survival?

As we read the gospel today, it's important that we not kid ourselves. Jesus' words are addressed to us just as much as anyone else. All of the readings today are telling us the same thing. God wants us to know, in no uncertain terms,

- that behavior is important,
- that God has some very real expectations of us,
- and that what we do, our actions and attitudes, matter.

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In this community we talk a lot about whether it rains or not. Crops depend on rain and a lot of folks in this community depend on the success of their fields. Flooding has taken more than one life. Roads have been washed out. Homes have been damaged. But as important as all of that it is- it's not as significant as whether we're tuned into the fact that Jesus is present- that the Messiah has come. That's a much bigger deal.

We need to be paying attention to God's call to faithfulness and to make sure we're paying attention, Jesus wraps it all up with strong words about family members opposing one another. He talks about what he has to endure and his impatience to get on with it. And we need to hear this stuff. Even if it's hard. We need to hear it.

We can't ignore the fact that God has offered us a vision of what human life can be and what it should be. If we've been listening at all, we know what that vision is like.

- We are called to keep God at the absolute center of our lives.
- We are to be more concerned about what we give than what we get. What we spend rather than what we earn.
- Jesus' followers should be more concerned with what fills our hearts than with what fills our purses.

- We should be working for those things that enrich our spirit and bring beauty to our souls.

God's vision for us has to do with how we behave, but even more, it has to do with who we become.

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When Jesus talks about fire, and about his baptism, and about division and conflict, he's talking about what it looks like and what it feels like for him, all the time. Typically it's only from time to time, that our lives look that way.

Here's another thing we need to clearly see that God's primary call for holiness and righteousness is not made to an evil world out there, telling them to shape up. God's call for holiness and righteous living is made to us, to those who claim to follow Jesus

Each one of us – grown-ups, teenagers, kids – every one of us has the same choice. Will we choose to try, over and over, to live as God will have us live- to be faithful, honorable Christians wherever we are, no matter where our faithfulness may lead us or what it might cost? It's hard. It's not for the weak, the lazy or the uncommitted. It demands our very best. We fall down, we get up. We fall down, we get up. And Jesus keeps calling us to follow him.

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To be clear, God doesn't give us this vision of how human beings should live so that God can sit up there with a checklist keeping score. This is not about whether we are good enough for God. Or whether we will be rewarded or punished for our behavior. That's just wrong. And none of this stuff about behavior and discipline has to do with whether or not God will keep loving us. God's love is a given, it's never at issue. Instead, there are at least two other reasons, two real reasons, why God tells us these things about what our lives should look like

The first reason is that God loves us and God wants the best for us- for all of us. And the best, and really, the only way for us to have the life that God has dreamt for us, is for us to try and live out the vision that God has shown us.

It's a little bit like the fact that most cars are made to run on gasoline. Sure, there are some other things you can put in cars that may work for a bit – things that might even make for a very interesting ride, for a little while. But then the car just won't work anymore. It's the same with God's vision for our lives. We just run better, over the long haul, when our lives are running as they are created to run.

God's way of living promises is life at its fullest and its most abundant. God loves us, and God wants the very best for us. That's one of the reasons God gives us his vision of how human beings should live. For our own sakes.

The other reason has to do with our mission, with our calling to be the body of Christ, to carry out the work and the ministry of Jesus Christ wherever we may be. Part of our witness to the world out there is offering it a real option – a different way to live and to be. This is what Jesus did. The way Jesus lived forced a choice from everyone who met him. Remember, Jesus didn't grab people by the throat and say, "You're a jerk. And if you don't get fixed, you are in deep trouble." Instead, he offered himself; he spoke of the Father; he told the truth; he lived with absolute integrity. People saw in Jesus something that caused a crisis within them – and they had to choose.

And for the world to see Jesus today, it has to look at his followers. There's really no place else to look.

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A few years ago there was an article about the best way to teach your children to be charitable. How could you teach them to be concerned about the poor? How could you help them to learn about the importance of social ministry? And the answer was simple. You teach them by example. The kids who grow up to think that caring for the hungry is important are the kids who volunteered with their parents at the food drive or

the soup kitchen when they were growing up. The kids who speak out when there is injustice are the ones who heard their parents speaking out in the same way. The truth is that the only way we can really share God's vision of life with others is by being on that path ourselves. Otherwise it doesn't make any sense. The world may not pay much attention to what we say, but it is watching what we do.

That's what's behind all of these tough lessons. It's the call to live life the way God intended. And it's a challenge. It's hard. Nevertheless, this is what we believe, this is the challenge we have accepted. This is who we are trying to be.

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So today, amidst all this talk of judgment and destruction, we are, I think, being invited to remember two things. First, we are being invited to remember that God loves us, all of us, more than we can possibly imagine. God wants, for all of us and for each of us, the best life possible. For this reason, God gives us, in Jesus, both a model of what human life can look like and the grace and forgiveness to embrace that life, and to live it faithfully.

The second thing we are called to remember is the fundamental issue of our own integrity. We are reminded to remember that any challenge to faithfulness, any vision of human life, that our faith offers isn't directed at others. This is really about us. It is with ourselves that we begin, and nowhere else.