

Sermon for Zion, March 11, 2018 – Lent 4 – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Hymns: 299 - Holy Holy Holy; We Will Glorify; 625 – Seek Ye First;
636 – When voices are confusing

Scripture: Matthew 7:1-5; 7:15-20; James 4:11-12

Sermon Title: Judge not! But be discerning.

Matthew 7:1-5

“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.

“And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.

Matthew 7:15-20

“Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can’t produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can’t produce good fruit. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.

James 4:11-12

Don’t speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God’s law. But your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you. God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to judge your neighbor?

“Do not judge others.” I am hearing this more and more, as the saying which most characterises people’s popular conception of Jesus. It used to be, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” along with “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Nowadays, though, “Do not judge others,” or in the old King James, “Judge not lest ye be judged,” is being used by many people in our society to forestall any critical evaluation of another person’s beliefs and actions. For many, “Judge not” is understood to mean, “Anything goes.” That there is no absolute right or wrong; that any one person’s decisions or standards or values or practices are every bit as valid as anyone else’s, and who are you to say any different? After all, “Judge not.”

And if that's all Jesus ever said, then you'd have to say those people would be right. But Jesus said a bit more than that. A lot more than that. Even just within the context of the Sermon on the Mount, in which this passage appears. Turn back a page or two, and you'll discover that Jesus in fact has a great deal to say about various things – murder, adultery, divorce, swearing, revenge, violence, hypocrisy – and not only the actions themselves, but the motivations behind them – hatred, anger, refusal to forgive, lust, infidelity, lack of respect, abuse of power, hypocrisy (again), self-righteousness, greed... the list goes on. That doesn't sound like someone who believes that what you think or say or do doesn't matter.

Plus, if you look at what comes afterwards, you'll find that Jesus teaches that a person's true character can indeed be determined by their actions – *“by their fruit you will recognise them,”* he says. And he caps it all off by saying that even those who appear outwardly pious and holy may still be revealed by God to be something else entirely. Listen (Matthew 7:21-23):

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

Add to this Jesus' strong words throughout the Gospels to the Pharisees and Sadducees, and you're not left with the picture of someone whose defining characteristic is, “Judge not.”

And yet. And yet Jesus reaches out compassionately to many whom society judged to be beneath consideration, beneath contempt, or little or no value. Jesus upheld the poor. The outcast. The terminally ill. The diseased. Jesus spoke openly with women, a practice regarded by his disciples as a waste of time; he commended the faith of a Roman Centurion, who was viewed in Jewish society as a cruel pagan oppressor; he told stories in which the despised Samaritans were the hero; he called a cursed tax gatherer to be a disciple; and more, and more, and more. And the Pharisees and Sadducees and critics of Jesus followed him from place to place, judging him, criticising him, comparing Jesus to the Devil himself. Jesus' refusal to pre-judge others got him into a lot of trouble.

But still - “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged.” Keeping the context what Jesus said in entirety, I think there are three ways of judging others which Jesus is warning us about. The first is prejudice – judging someone based upon appearance, race, nationality, gender, socioeconomic status, physical ability, or other factors, and setting a lesser value upon them as a result.

There's a particularly timely Canadian story in connection with this. The Canadian mint has just announced a new 10 dollar bill which carries the image of Viola Desmond, a woman "who stood up for the rights of black people in Nova Scotia and went to jail for it." As the CBC reported:

Viola Desmond played a seminal role in Canada's civil rights movement when, on Nov. 8, 1946, she went to see a movie at the Roseland Theatre in New Glasgow, N.S., while her car was getting fixed. Desmond, 32, was dragged out of the theatre by police and jailed for defiantly sitting in the "whites only" section of the film house. At the time, black people could only sit in the balcony. The civil rights activist was convicted of defrauding the province of a one-penny tax — the difference in tax between a downstairs and upstairs ticket — even though Desmond had asked to pay the difference. She was released after paying a \$20 fine and \$6 in court costs. She appealed her conviction but lost. Desmond's court case was the first known legal challenge against racial segregation brought forward by a black woman in Canada. Segregation was legally ended in Nova Scotia in 1954, in part because of the publicity generated by Desmond's case.

Jesus has no time whatsoever for prejudice. His refusal to go along with the prejudices of his day often caused great hatred against him. But his disciples followed his lead; as Peter discovered (Acts 10:34-35 NCV): "I really understand now that to God every person is the same. In every country God accepts anyone who worships him and does what is right." And as Paul proclaimed (Galatians 3:28): "In Christ, there is no difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free person, male and female. You are all the same in Christ Jesus." On the first and most basic level, "Judge Not" means to reject prejudice in all its forms.

There is a second form of judging Jesus warns against. He does so frequently, but most explicitly in a parable which Luke remembers for us (Luke 18:9-14):

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.” That’s the key line, as expressed in the New Living Translation; here are some other translations of the same verse:

- *Jesus told a story to some people who thought they were better than others and who looked down on everyone else*
- *Jesus also used this illustration with some who were sure that God approved of them while they looked down on everyone else*
- *He told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people*
- *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt*

I think you’re getting the idea. And I think that’s what Jesus is getting at in our passage on “judging others” – we mustn’t be like those *“who are complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and look down their noses at everyone else.”* This is something I call “the sin of comparison.” Rather than coming to God with our own faults, failings and confessions, expressing remorse, seeking forgiveness, and asking God’s help to better follow the way of Christ, we come before God comparing ourselves to others, and say, “I’m not perfect, but I’m better than that guy. In fact, compared to him, I’m pretty good. I’ll bet you’re pretty pleased with me, God!” That way, destruction lies. Because when we think that way, we close ourselves off to God’s offer of forgiveness, so impressed with our own comparative goodness that we feel we have nothing to be forgiven for. It’s a deadly attitude to have. For it leads to our own judgement.

When Jesus looked at many of the Pharisees, this is the attitude he saw. And his special name for them? *“Alas for you, you hypocritical scribes and Pharisees! You are like white-washed tombs, which look fine on the outside but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all kinds of rotteness. For you appear like good men on the outside—but inside you are a mass of pretence and wickedness (Matthew 23:27).”*

And there’s the word Jesus will return to again and again when speaking about judging others: Hypocrite. And this is the third component which Jesus talks about when speaking of judging others: Hypocrite. What is a hypocrite anyway?

Hypocrite is an ancient technical theatre term for “one who wears a mask.” In Greek theatre, the actors disguised who they really were, and assumed a different role or persona, by using a mask. Jesus possibly picked up on this word, on this idea, from the theatre in Sepphoris, a large capital city less than an hour’s walk from Nazareth. In fact, it is quite possible Jesus and his stepdad, the builder Joseph, worked on or nearby the

construction of this very theatre, which was being built during Jesus' teen years. Hypocrite becomes a favourite word of Jesus; he uses it over a dozen times in Matthew alone. As in our passage:

“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.

“And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.

It's a great illustration, and it combines Jesus' carpentry background – how many times had he ended up with sawdust in his eye? – with his theatre illustrations. And his message is clear: Don't spend your time and energy criticising others. You've got problems of your own that need dealing with. Hiding your own faults by criticising others will not solve your problems. Deal first with your own faults: Only then will you “*see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.*”

Confession time. In my younger ministry years, I was very critical of many of my colleagues. I often criticised their sermons, their work ethic, their level of knowledge, their dedication. As I get older, closing in on 30 years of ordination, having struggled to write sermons, to deal with stress, to learn more than I increasingly forget, to begin to gaze longingly towards that distant, golden shore known as “retirement,” my own mask of perfection is beginning to slip. I find myself ever less critical of colleagues, instead trying to understand them, support them, help them when I can, even as others have helped me. I have had a lot of beams in my eye over the years. I still do. I am hopeful that I can help others with the occasional speck.

Thirdly, criticising others is damaging not only to ourselves, not only to the objects of our scorn, but it is damaging to the body of Christ, the community of believers we call the church. James warns against precisely this in our other reading this morning: *Don't speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God's law.* We are not called to tear one another down. We are called to build one another up. If a fellow churchgoer is on the wrong path, it is our job to befriend them, encourage them, journey together with them, lead them back into proper practice and understanding. Not simply judge them, or criticise them or their behavior to others. Or condemn them as people.

I know of a family from one of my churches whose adult children all attend church, but none of them goes to the church of their parents. When I asked one of the

kids why, he said, “Every Sunday, on the drive home, we’d sit in the back seat and hear my parents talk about everything that was wrong with everybody else, from their clothes to their hair to where they sat, or with who. And then around the lunch table, we’d hear about all the things wrong with the minister and his sermon, with the music and the choir. We all love God, but we couldn’t wait to get out of our parent’s church.” Don’t let that be your family. Don’t let that be you.

“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.” Don’t let who you are be defined by your criticism of others.

But again, please remember that as Christians, we are not asked to turn off our brains, to be blindly accepting of every form of behavior, or to regard every expression of belief, no matter how unsound, as of equal value. Jesus, the Apostles Peter, Paul, James, John and others all warn us about being careful to ensure that what we believe is in accordance with the teaching of Jesus and the Scriptures, and that what we practice is in keeping with the life of discipleship. Again, as we saw earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, we are to carefully examine our motivations and our inner thoughts, as well as our actions. When our brother or sister is straying from the path, we are to pray for them, encourage them, and in love help them regain their footing (Matthew 18:15). As Paul counsels (2 Timothy 4:2), *“Correct people’s mistakes. Warn them. Encourage them with words of hope. Be very patient as you do these things. Teach them carefully.”* And do it all with love.

As co-citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, as brothers and sisters in Christ, Paul tells us how we should behave as God’s family (1Thessalonians 5). Rather than live in judgement of one another, rather than criticise one another, rather than condemn, we are to:

Live in peace with each other... warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else... Hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.

In short: *“Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing (1 Thessalonians 5:11).”* Keep your eyes open. Be discerning. But keep your heart open too. And look upon others with patience, forgiveness, and love. After all, isn’t that how God looks upon you? *“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.”* Amen.