

Do Not Judge
Matthew 7:1-12
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In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Clarence Jordan, the founder of the interracial Koinonia farm, tells this story:

The story goes that a man wishing to find a place to settle drove into a rural community and inquired of an old farmer what kind of people lived there. In reply, the farmer asked, "Stranger, what kind of people live in the community you came from?" "They are bad people," he said. "Gossips, slanderers, cheapskates." The old man shook his head. "You might as well move on," he said, "because that's the kind of people who live here, too."

Later on, another man came through seeking a place to live, and he asked the same old farmer about the people. "How were the people where you came from?" inquired the farmer. "Wonderful, simply wonderful," he said. "They were thoughtful, kind, loving. I surely hated to leave them." "Unload," beamed the farmer, "because that's the kind of people you'll find around here."

That story's a pretty decent midrash on today's Gospel which is all about our attitudes towards other people and how we treat them. Anna Wierzbicka succinctly summarizes, as she often has in our study this winter, the meaning of the text: "to do good things for others and to identify with others—as one needs to identify with others to be able to love one's neighbor as oneself."

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has enjoined us to love everyone and to build a community based upon that love. This is one of those simple, easy things that every kid can grasp, yet is also difficult work that requires spiritual discipline and developing skills like forgiveness and peacemaking. In today's passage Jesus reminds us that we cannot love one another if we are judging each other, and we especially can't do it if we are being hypocritical.

The passage ends with the Golden Rule. Now there is much scholarly debate about the Golden Rule and whether Jesus' formulation presents an ethical advance over similar statements in rabbinic Judaism or other cultures, because of course similar statements do appear in pretty much every human culture. In some form or fashion, we humans have grasped that at the core of our treatment of one another should be this measure of fairness, of treating others as we would be treated.

But this is not a categorical imperative. Dale C. Allison writes,

It is not a law that one can obey without reflection. It is rather a general principle that requires imaginative application. Once again, then, and despite the traditional name

“golden rule,” the text comes to us not with a rule but with an invitation to demonstrate creatively a generosity akin to that of God.

Reflecting on Jesus’ message will lead us into taking the perspective of the other. To see and feel from their point of view. And when we do that we will learn “mercy, humility, and tolerance” towards others.

One time while in high school youth group I acted wildly out-of-character and contrary to this Gospel teaching. It is a humiliating story for me to tell.

Our youth group was either at camp or on a retreat down at our campground on Grand Lake. I was the oldest boy in the group, the acknowledged leader. There was a young boy there -- his first time at one of our youth events. I do not remember his name. I do remember that everyone found him annoying. So it was determined by the other boys that we would “initiate him” into the group. It was very unlike me to go along with such a plan, but I did, partly because I was so often the outsider myself and it was enjoyable to be on the inside. So, while he was sleeping, we wrapped his bunk in toilet paper and covered him with shaving cream. Nothing too bad, but that’s really not the point.

When the young man awoke he began to cry. It was at that point that my natural empathy took over, and I realized my mistake and began to comfort him. However, as I talked with him, it became quickly apparent that he was crying tears of joy. As he spoke, he was excited that we had initiated him. He interpreted what we had done as us welcoming him into the group. In his perspective, we had finally noticed him and given him attention. He was so overwhelmed with happiness that he was crying.

Needless to say, every one of us there was humiliated. We were let off the hook by his interpretation of the incident. But his interpretation of our intentions deeply shamed us.

We should never underestimate the power of welcome. And we should always be clear about the abusive, bullying power of judgment as well.

Here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus condemns the abuse of religious power which judges other people and uses those judgments to exclude. He wants a very different kind of a community. The kingdom of God is open to absolutely everyone. No matter where they are in life’s journey. No matter who they are, or what they have done. The story of the speck and the log is a reminder that we all stand equally in need of forgiveness, grace, and mercy. That should be all we need to learn humility towards others.

So, no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcomed and loved in God’s community. All you have to do is ask, seek, or knock and God will welcome you home. The great Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 19th century Baptist pastor in London, proclaimed,

Ask for what you want, seek for what you have lost, knock for that from which you are excluded. . . . If you seem shut out from comfort, from knowledge, from hope, from God, from heaven, then knock, for the Lord will open unto you.

If you have ever experienced the power of welcome and inclusion, then you know what it is like finding your true home after being lost in the wilderness. It has the power to heal your

wounds, revive your spirits, and bring you new life.

Throughout this sermon series we have talked about learning to be like God. To see like God. To love like God. To treat other people the way that God does. Jesus is reminding us that God knows everything there is to know about each one of us. God knows all our strengths and wonderful possibilities. God also knows all our limitations and our failings. God knows all the things we have done wrong. All our deepest secrets. All our sins. And, yet, God loves us completely and fully and with abandon – just the way we are.

I believe that when we welcome all of God's children, then we are expressing the very character of God. But there are those who do not understand this. They do not have the ears to hear or the eyes to see. They are blinded by the logs in their own eyes and the wax in their own ears. About these Jesus says, "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine."

If God loves every one of us and still accepts us, then who are any of us to judge other people. The only judging that need ever be done has already been done – by God. And though God wants us to become whole and healthy and free--God does expect things of us--God loves us still.

So for any one of us to judge another person is to elevate ourselves above God. It is distrustful of God's promises and God's provision. And it is the supreme idolatry – to place ourselves as superior to and sovereign over God's judgment. In Romans, St. Paul used his harshest hyperbolic language for religious people who judge others as sinners. He said that these people, the religious ones who judged others, deserved to die and were "storing up wrath for [themselves] on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."

What is expected of us is not judgment, but love, welcome, confession, forgiveness, and peace-making. We will see the speck in our sisters and brothers eyes. But, our responsibility is to help them with that speck by being part of a community of mercy and grace where each of us can become healthy, whole, and free.

Notice that Jesus says, "for with the judgment you make you will be judged." The reason we can help each other without judging is because we see our own faults. If we have developed humility about ourselves and learned to take the perspective of others, having welcomed them fully into the community, then we are able to approach each other with mercy when we have done something wrong. This means that when we, ourselves, need to receive mercy for something we have done wrong, we will receive it. We will receive it from those to whom we have granted it.

This is not easy. In fact, it is quite difficult. And we cannot do it alone. It takes all of us working together to live according to the Sermon on the Mount.

But when we do live this way, we bear witness to the world. Because the world will see us as radically different from every other human society and they will be drawn to our welcome, our mercy, our forgiveness. They will see us as the light of the world, inviting them to come home, come to their true home, in the bosom of God.

One Sunday in 2008 Michael and I went for lunch at one of our local Cracker Barrels. I was craving macaroni and cheese and their chicken and dumplings. At the table next to us sat a family. The grandparents, the parents, and the toddler grandson who was getting his mashed

potatoes all over his face and entertaining everyone.

When the adults got up to leave, the grandchild began to squeal and reach for his grandfather and they couldn't get him out of his seat fast enough. Once he was set free, the child ran to jump into his grandfather's arms. And for a few seconds . . . I wish you could have seen the looks on their faces, but . . . I think you can imagine it. The grandson, as he ran to leap into his grandfather's arms, had a look on his face like the absolutely greatest thing that could possibly happen in all the world was about to happen. And the grandfather, as he bent over and held out his arms for his grandson had the same look, like the absolutely greatest thing that could possibly happen in all the world was about to happen. And I thought, "Yes! That look is what Jesus was talking about."