

This is our last week in the Sermon on the Mount. Last week, Ellen focused on the Lord's Prayer. Following that, we find a collection of teaching of Jesus on assorted matters- loosely structured- in places it reads more like Proverbs, as it moves from one topic to the next. Preacher and commentator, Tom Long sees a common thread- it is the urgency of seeking the kingdom of heaven above all earthly distractions. Following the Lord's Prayer, "Jesus warns against the human tendency to stockpile wealth as a hedge against insecurity." <sup>i</sup> As we begin our reading today, Jesus warns against the distraction of self-righteousness. I encourage you to read all of chapter 7, This morning, I will read Matthew 7:1-5. Listen now to God's word.

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"It's not for me to judge."

"To each, their own."

We have heard, and perhaps used these disclaimers many times. Yet, if we are honest, most of us are umpires at heart. I don't know who said that but unfortunately, it rings all too true. We like to call balls and strikes...on somebody else, that is.

The story is told of a woman in an airport. She bought a book and a package of cookies at the News Shop as she waited for her plane. She took her seat in the terminal and quickly became engrossed in her book. She noticed that the man one seat away from her was fumbling to open the package of cookies that was laying on the seat between them. She was so shocked that a stranger would eat her cookies that she didn't know what to do- so she reached over and took one of the cookies and ate it. (No doubt this was pre-Covid) The man didn't say anything but soon reached over and took another cookie. Well, this woman wasn't going to let him eat them all, so she reached over and took another one too. When they were down to one cookie, the man reached over, broke the cookie in half, gave her one half, and then got up and left. The woman couldn't believe the man's nerve! Soon the announcement came to board the plane. Still angry at the man's audacity and puzzled by the incident she took her seat. The woman then reached into her purse for a tissue. That is when it suddenly dawned on her that she really shouldn't judge people so harshly- for there in her purse... lay her still unopened package of cookies. OOPS!

It is easier to tell a innocent story at which we can laugh than to think of stories closer to home- stories where churches or families or neighbors, or even a nation, have been torn apart by a kind of harsh judgement in which one person or group looks down upon the likes of the other. And it is easier to tell even those kind of stories than it is to admit, or perhaps even recognize that we too fall into the role of the harsh umpire- sometimes with hurtful and devastating consequences.

In 2019 social scientist and writer, Arthur C. Brooks, wrote a column published in the NYTimes entitled, *Our Culture of Contempt*. In the article he cites research done in 2014 on “motive attribution asymmetry.” Hang in there with me- motive attribution asymmetry is the assumption that your ideology is based in love, while your opponent’s is based in hate. The researchers found that the average Republican and the average Democrat suffer from a level of motive attribution asymmetry that is comparable with that of Palestinians and Israelis. I find this at once shocking, and sadly, easy to believe. Each side thinks it is driven by benevolence, while the other is evil and motivated by hate. Have you found yourself feeling that way...at least at times?

According to Brooks, this leads us to something far worse than incivility and intolerance. Believing those with whom you disagree are motivated by hate leads to contempt- not just contempt for other people’s ideas ---but for the people themselves. Brooks concludes that we, in the United States, suffer a pandemic of contempt. And if you are wondering what he means by contempt, Brooks uses this definition by philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Contempt is “the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another...”<sup>ii</sup> the conviction of the worthlessness of another. Rather than playing the umpire calling balls and strikes, this sounds more like a referee, calling a flagrant 2 and ejecting a player from the game.

Jesus says, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.” This is one of those verses that is quoted often or is in view when people say things like, “It is not my place to judge,” but what does Jesus mean? Later in this same chapter, Jesus tells his followers to beware of false prophets. That requires a form of judging or discerning, does it not? In Matthew 18, Jesus describes a way for the church to confront the wrongdoing of one of its members. Again, that requires some kind of moral judgment. Surely Jesus does not mean that we are not to think or ever make a moral judgment or always hold our tongue. If someone is abusing children or spreading vicious rumors in the community or embezzling money at work are we to throw up our hands and say, “It’s not my business to judge others.”<sup>iii</sup> Certainly not.

The Greek word used for judge in this passage has a range of meanings. It means to make a moral judgment. It means to make a judicial decision. It means to enforce a law. It is used to refer to God’s judgment. It means to condemn. It means all of those things. New Testament scholar Warren Carter asserts that in this passage the meaning most likely refers to condemnation.<sup>iv</sup> Do not condemn. Do not write someone off. Condemnation is pronouncing a verdict- usurping the role of God- making the judgment that another person is less than an equally beloved child of God.

It is possible to distinguish contempt and condemnation but they both come from a place of superiority- a place of self-righteousness...and both serve to end relationship- end conversation- end community. Both are dangerous and they are incompatible with the kingdom of heaven.

Even if we disagree with Carter's assertion that Jesus has condemnation in mind, which is always forbidden in Scripture, by the way...even if we believe Jesus is really speaking about making moral judgments, self-righteousness is in view in this passage. As much as I would like to say that self-righteousness is someone else's problem, if I am honest, I recognize that I too need to look in the mirror.

As we read through this teaching, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Jesus teaches, "do not judge until.... This is where the humorous, parable-like saying comes in. "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye and do not see the log in your own eye?" In other words, do not judge until you take the plank out of your own eye, for when you do that, and only then, will you see clearly. And seeing clearly changes everything.

As Tom Long writes, "When we recognize that we too are broken and flawed, that we do not stand on unspoiled moral ground, then we move from harsh judgment to tender concern to help the neighbor. Instead of a finger poked in the neighbor's face, we reach out mercifully to wipe the neighbor's eye."<sup>v</sup> The purpose of judgment in the Bible is not to put another down and throw them out of the community. Judgment is a means of restoring a person...a community...to right relationship with God. Its purpose is not condemnation but always, always redemption.

It is easy to judge others harsher than we do ourselves. In the current climate it is far too easy to look upon those with different views with contempt. When we do that, we forget our common humanity. Part of our common humanity is that we each fall short of God's intention for us- we all stand in need of God's grace and mercy- not just our neighbor over there or that other political party. We can only see clearly when we remember our dependence upon the mercy of God, and give thanks that God does not treat us as we deserve or repay us according to our inequities. When we realize the immensity of our own struggles, when we feel the weight of the log in our own eye- and understand the truth that we have been fighting a losing battle were it not for the mercy of God- transformation begins to take place...in us! That harsh inner umpire's heart softens. We are moved from self-righteousness to a greater generosity of spirit toward others. And when that happens relationships continue, conversation continues, and by God's grace, community may be restored.

In this teaching, Jesus is not saying that we are never to make a moral judgment or always hold our tongue. He is not saying that anger over injustice is wrong or that we all just need to agree. He is certainly not inviting us to use this teaching as an excuse to avoid grappling with difficult issues. Jesus is inviting us to participate in a process of spiritual growth, to examine our own lives, to acknowledge the ways we fall short, to recognize our dependence on our gracious God so that we are not tempted to play God with others.

There is nothing easy about this. Only by God's grace, can we begin to live into what Jesus is commanding. And so we seek, we ask, we pound on heaven's door praying for

the capacity and strength to live as God calls us to live. Our world needs us to remember our common humanity. By God's grace, may we begin to see more clearly so we begin to mend our families, our communities, our nation, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me bless God's holy name.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits  
who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the Pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.<sup>vi</sup>

Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and do not forget...  
do not forget!

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas Long, *Matthew*, pg.73-74.

<sup>ii</sup> Arthur C. Brooks, *Our Culture of Contempt*, New York Times, 3/2/2019.

<sup>iii</sup> Long, pg 77.

<sup>iv</sup> *Pulpit Fiction* podcast, NL 125, February 5, 2023.

<sup>v</sup> Long, pg.77.

<sup>vi</sup> Psalm 103:1-4