



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Judgement, Humility, and Love

Sermon by Pastor John Strommen

on Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29

Sunday, February 10, 2019

The Sermon on the Mount is a sermon to Jesus' followers about how we are to live in God's kingdom which has come right here on earth in the form of Jesus. So, yes, that means now, not just in the next life. What does life look like when we live according to this kingdom, not the world's kingdom?

Well, for instance, Jesus says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." "Don't point out the speck in your neighbor's eye when you have a log in your own eye!" Now, this passage is often misinterpreted and taken to mean that what someone else does is none of our business and we ought to withhold our disapproval of them and keep our opinions about another person's behavior to ourselves.

But these words of Jesus don't mean we never make judgments about someone else's behavior. For instance, the Lord's prayer (also from the Sermon on the Mount) says we are to forgive others. Now, if we forgive others, that means we judge other people, or we would have nothing to forgive! And did you notice that in the end, when the condemner does remove the log from his/her eye, what does he do then? He removes the speck from his neighbor's eye!

So, we *are called* in love to uphold ethical standards, the ten commandments and the law of love: we are called to call out one another when they offend or neglect, especially when someone's behavior victimizes someone else. If we happen to know that our neighbor is abusing his/her child, does Jesus urge us to look the other way? No.

When Jesus says, "Judge not," he means when we attempt to play God and condemn someone to hell, , as it were. And we have no business attempting to judge who is beyond God's mercy. We honestly have no idea of the depth and power of God's mercy with human lives. Plus, for anyone we deem beyond God's mercy, we will likely regard that person as an abomination, someone to whom I will give no dignity or respect as a human being. This kind of judging – assessing another person's ultimate goodness in the eyes of God – all too easily becomes a license to hate, and then love is out the window. Yet we are called to love, aren't we?

A great example of this are the judgmental t-shirts for sale in Buena Vista, CO, that were once being sold by a Christian vendor. Have I shared this before? The t-shirt has a cartoon of a pot smoker with the caption, "Hey, pothead, the only dope smoking in hell will be you." It's kind of funny play on words, I'll admit, but think about it: if smoking pot is an unforgivable sin, God's mercy doesn't reach very far, does it? It's incredibly mean spirited and clearly in violation of the Sermon on the Mount. It's not your place or mine to figure out who's going to heaven or hell. That's God's arena, but bear in mind, this God is a God of love, forgiveness and daily bread. So, don't get your hopes up if you really want to see someone not make it to heaven. You might be disappointed by who shows up!

When Jesus says, "Do not throw your pearls before swine," this is a statement about such judgmental persons. Pearls are giving what is holy (grace, forgiveness) to others who want an excuse to judge, hate and use their religion as a means of excluding and punishing. See any of those people in the world?

The really sly thing about this passage though is how Jesus turns the table on such presumption. He offers us a wonderfully challenging and absurd image of a log in your eye. To me, this seems like unnecessary overkill. It makes sense to say, "before you point out the speck in your neighbor's eye, remove the speck in your own eye." But no! I not only have a speck, I have a log! Where did the log come from and how does it even fit in my eye? There's a point to be made that we ought not miss. First of all, we forget Jesus words in verse 1 that if we are to be judged by the very measuring stick that we impose on others, we might be the ones who are lucky to get into heaven. But second, what Jesus seems to be getting at is that those of us who are fond of making lazy judgments and sweeping generalizations about our fellow human beings are often the most blind to our own sin, and even worse: we might think we've really got it together when we don't. Then we're self-righteous. Now watch the speck turn into a log real fast!

Last summer, I was in an interesting conversation with another pastor and fellow progressive/liberal minded person. We were talking about the political and social divide we now experience in America, and about how easy it is for progressive Christians to point their fingers at our more conservative brothers and sisters on the other side of the divide and call them racists, bigots. Now, there is clearly racism in America and we need to address it, without a doubt. "But before we impose the racism litmus test on those people," my friend Rebecca insisted, "how do we measure up?" Do we have something in our eye, too? Maybe we should tend to that first or also.

Here's an example. Many progressive Christian churches emphasize inclusivity and tolerance. ELCA churches tend to be this way, although some much more so than others. On the spectrum of churches, we at Mt Carmel are probably

more progressive in our views than your average American church. Anyway, it is a sad fact that most self-identifying “progressive” or “liberal” churches that stress diversity are among the least diverse churches in America. The ELCA, for instance, is the least diverse church of all the protestant denominations. We are overwhelmingly middle and upper middle-aged white people. My point? Many liberals – like me, for instance – talk a good game, but ought to be very hesitant to accuse others of racism when we don’t have many relationships with people and communities of color. Or, maybe it’s this: we all have sins to confess on this count.

So, Jesus’ caution to us would be: before you point your finger, search yourself for your own shortcomings and ask for forgiveness. In other words, be humble. Recognize that you are no saint.

And it’s quite interesting that the golden rule comes right after the log in your eye passage: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. So our passage today is not only being real with yourself. There is clearly an ethic of love at work here. Rather than talking down to each other and being blind to our own shortcomings, Jesus nudges us toward respecting our brothers and sisters, even those we have serious disagreements with and doubts about. Given all of our political diversity, might it be the case that we can do much more constructive work with one another when we are on a level playing field of respect where we seek common ground with others, rather than quickly demonizing them. I believe Martin Luther taught us the same thing when, in his explanation of the eighth commandment, he urged we Christians to defend our neighbor, speak well of him or her, and put the most charitable construction possible on all that he or she says.

This is closely related to an earlier part of Jesus’ sermon on the Lord’s Prayer. As we know, Jesus instructs us, “and forgive me my trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” If we are forgiven – and that is God’s unconditional promise - then the Lord’s prayer, or any Christian prayer, asks us to enact and live out in our own life the grace that we have received from God. So, part of being forgiven is being a forgiver, instead of someone who vows to get even. This is what Jesus teaches us about prayer. We pray for God to act and we trust in God’s goodness, and then we join the cause and share with others the very good things God gives to us.

And so, in our relations with each other, how do we respond first in love, not judgment? Again, judgment may be called for if the person needs an intervention of some kind or a tough love comment. But that’s only because you love them, not because you want to take them down.

My brother Pete tells the story about when he was a little boy and he had his nice clothes on and he fell down in a mud puddle and got muddy water all over his face and clothes. His first reaction was to curse, so he used a swear word. Now, in

my family growing up, swear words were not acceptable. However, I think Pete was surprised that my mom didn't scold him for swearing. Why? Because she could see the emotion underneath his angry outburst. She could see that he was embarrassed and humiliated, and that was why he used the bad word. So, what did my mom do? Rather than focus on the language issue, she discerned the more important thing was to tell him it was OK. So, she comforted Pete and acted out of love. We recently looked at the scripture from Isaiah, "A bruised reed, I will not break. A dimly burning wick I will not quench." These are God's words about how he treats human frailty. God picks us up when we are down. God forgives us and breathes life back into us.

Does this excuse bad behavior? No, but the "bad behavior" may not be the most important thing.

So, the golden rule: would you rather have someone blow the whistle any time you do something wrong or would you rather have someone who paid attention to what was actually going on in your life, underneath, and was there for you when you needed it? OK, it's a rhetorical question.

So, none of this is easy. We do take moral and ethical transgressions seriously and we do not look the other way. And yet, we look at our own culpability first so that we are not self-righteous. And we remember that we are called always to act in love and forgiveness toward our brothers and sisters in the human family. So, says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Amen.