

“Taking the Speck Out of Our Neighbors’ Eye”

Matthew 5: 1-12

Let me start out by saying that if you are expecting a hellfire and condemnation sermon today, you are going to be disappointed. I don’t have the voice for it. I also figure that there is enough of that going on in our world right now that we didn’t need to come here today, looking for more. Instead, rather what I hope we came here seeking was a word of grace, a word of love and a word of hope.

And we get it right there in the very first line...Don’t judge unless you want to be judged. Don’t pick on others, jumping on their faults, criticizing their failures unless you want the same behavior.

I’ll admit this seems strange and counter-initiative. And it probably doesn’t rank up there with the whole “Jesus Loves You and So Do I” as one of the most favorite churchy type of sayings. But this saying, “Don’t judge unless you want to be judged” has the power to change lives. It can and will transform lives. This saying is the starting point for every relationship we have and experience as people of faith. It is one of the factors which shape our relationships with our neighbors.

To give us a little background and context today, this particular saying is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount which begins in Chapter 5. As we may

remember, Jesus has gathered his disciples together on a mountain. He then begins teaching them the counter-institutive, life transforming values of the Kingdom of God. It is in the Sermon on the Mount where we get things like “Love Your Enemies” or “You Can’t Serve God and Wealth equally” or my all time favorite...”Don’t worry. Today’s troubles are enough for today.

All of these sayings which Jesus shares with his disciples speak to being in relationship with our neighbors. They speak to being in relationship with one another as a community of faith. They call us to examine how we live out our faith as disciples of Christ here on Earth, people whose very foundational prayer petitions God for thy kingdom to come on Earth as it is in heaven.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is naming things which break down (and not in a good way), things which breaks down how we live together in community. Jesus speaks to how too often we fail to be in community with one another simply because we feel free to judge one another. Jesus names the values of this world which shape our relationship with our neighbors rather than allowing ourselves to be transformed by the values of the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus talks about judging one another in this text, he is not talking about self-interest or even self-protection. Nor is Jesus offering us an excuse to

disengage from one another because after all, we don't want other people up in our business, so why should we be all up in their business.

No, in fact, the opposite is true. This verse is about judging others before we take an honest look at ourselves. It is a wakeup call for us as people of faith to realize that our words and our actions have consequences. You see, what happens, more often not, when we begin judging others without first owning our own mistakes, what happens is that we create a situation which allows a “we are better than them” mentality to infiltrate everything we do. This type of superiority way of being enables us to feel free to access the failures of others anytime and anywhere.

What Jesus offers the disciples, offers us again today is a word of caution. This is not supposed to be something that makes us feel better about ourselves, a saying which allows us to come to church, sing a few songs, and then leave unaffected. This saying about judging others is calling us to a way of being in relationship with our neighbors, even with ourselves, which is grounded in the values of the Kingdom of God, values like love and grace. This saying is a way for us promote community in ways that are counter intuitive compared to the ways of this world.

Jesus wants us as his disciples, as the ones who are called to be the Body of Christ here on Earth, Jesus wants us to see that all this type of superiority mentality

does is create more hurt and brokenness in this world. This judging others before we take a good look at ourselves, all it does is put us farther and farther away from fully realizing the vision of the Kingdom of God and now.

These words about judgement from the Sermon on the Mount are a reminder to all of us that 'after God has dealt so graciously with our many, many shortcomings, how can we dare to treat others in such a mean-spirited fashion?' It is a reminder that yes, we are far from perfect and yet,...and yet we have experienced God's abundant grace in our lives time and time again, whether we deserved it or not. And as ones who are called to reflect the Kingdom of God in all we do and say, in all things, and at all times, we should extend that same grace to others.

Now again please don't hear me say "We have a get out of jail free card." No one is denying that there is judgement. And no one is saying all judgement is bad. For example...We know that there is judgement in the Bible. John the Baptist talks about it. Jesus talks about it. Even the apostle Paul calls the community to judge behavior which destroys the moral context of the community, by telling those crazy Corinthians to kick out a member who was marrying his stepmother.

What I am saying, what the good book tells us is that there is judgement and then there is JUDGEMENT. And the difference between these two is what we are called to live out in our lives as disciples of Christ here on Earth.

Or let me say it this way...Fred Rogers often shared a story about his time during seminary when he went to go hear a well known preacher as part of his spiritual development to hone his own personal preaching style. “As it turned out, there happened to be a guest preacher that Sunday. At first, hearing about the aged substitute orator made no difference – Fred had heard outstanding guest preachers many times before.

However, this man was less than outstanding. In fact, he was downright dreadful, in Fred’s mind. He failed to observe the most basic homiletical rules and preaching commandments. Virtually everything he said went against everything Fred had learned about preaching in seminary. Internally, Fred was incredulous that any preacher or any sermon could be that bad. When it finally ended, after what seemed like an eternity of torment, Fred turned to his friend beside him so they could commiserate over the pitiful pulpit effort they had endured. But before he could open his mouth with a barbed criticism, he noticed tears streaming down the cheeks of his friend. She turned to him and whispered, “He said exactly what I needed to hear.”

Fred pondered her reaction for a long time. Eventually, he came to understand that the chasm between their reactions had little to do with the sermon, and everything to do with each of their attitudes. He had come in judgment. But she had come in need. And because she recognized her need and was open enough

to hear an inspired word, the Holy Spirit was able to translate sincerity into truth. Her posture of [openness] made all the difference.”

That difference is what we are called to live out in all we do and say as we continue to work to bring about the Kingdom of God for all of God’s children here and now.

These words of judgement are a word of hope for us as people of faith because they do not stand alone. They are placed within the context of Loving our God and our Loving Neighbor. Matthew, by placing these words of judgement within this context helps us to realize that as people of faith, no matter what, we are called to live by one simple rule of thumb for our behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for *them*. Add up God’s Law and Prophets and this is what you get. Amen.

