

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
"Discernment in Judgment"

Scripture: Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29; Psalm 37:16-18

Opening Hymn: Eternal, Unchanging, we sing to your praise 337,

Closing Hymn: God bless your church with strength 491

Children's Hymn: Lord, I Want to Be a Christian 571

Choruses: This is my commandment, Amazing love, The bond of love

Rev. Steve Filyk

February 3, 2019

This past Spring, I was hiking with a friend
Up above Peterson creek.

Like many young adults this friend was raised in the church.
And like many young adults
Church is no longer a real part of his life.

During our conversation we talked about work,
We talked about money,
And we eventually talked about faith.

As we were climbing up the hill towards the church
We started talking about the Bible
And the stories we remembered from our childhood.

He remarked "the Bible seems to raise as many questions as it answers".

"The Bible seems to raise as many questions as it answers."

This seemed to me to be at least on the reason
That my friend was no longer connected to church.

Now you might take issue with his statement.

For many of us Scripture is a source of guidance
And great comfort.

But you've got to admit that he was onto something.

I mean if you are looking for simple answers to big questions,
Maybe Christianity is not for you.

Just consider today's passage on discernment.

Take that opening statement:

"Do not judge, or you two will be judged."

Some of us hear this and inwardly shout:

"Hooray—you go Jesus!"

We are tired of people offering their opinions

On our child-rearing, our purchases, or our recycling.

We are tired of the free advice on our eating or drinking

Our likes and our loves.

"Hooray—you go Jesus."

People shouldn't judge me.

It's none of their business.

But when we read a little further

the same passage goes on

To make all sorts of different judgements.

People are called dogs and people are labelled pigs.

In the section we skipped over

There's a warning about wolves in sheep's clothing,
And talk about good trees and bad trees;
Good fruit and bad fruit.

Some of us hear THIS and inwardly shout:

“Hooray—you go Jesus!”

We are tired of people saying everything is good.

We can't celebrate everything that others find pleasant:

Their ways of eating or drinking,
Their likes and their loves.

“Hooray—you go Jesus.”

Call it as you see it.

We can't label bad things 'good'.

You might be confirmed in your positions

If you listen to just part of today's passage.

But if you listen to the whole passage together

You might find yourself confused and bewildered.

Is Jesus downright rejecting a judging of others

Or is he whole-heartedly embracing it?

PAUSE

Some people would argue that our English translations
 have made a mistake, and have complicated the reading.
 They would argue that 'judge' should be rendered 'condemn'.

That is, Jesus has nothing against us scrutinizing others,
 but would prohibit us from damning them.

But this goes little distance in resolving any tension in the passage.
 Calling someone a dog or a wolf in sheep's clothing,
 Is equivalent to cursing them.

At the same time this fails to explain why the Gospel of Luke
 chooses a different Greek word
 to speak about condemnation.ⁱ

So, we are back to the same problem we had at the beginning:
 what is Jesus saying?

A better route might be to recognise that like proverbs
 That statement, "Do not judge, or you will be judged"
 Is not meant to be regarded as a moral absolute.

The proverb:
 "Start children off on the way they should go,
 and even when they are old they will not turn from it."ⁱⁱ

Is a principle not a guarantee,
 Nor a means by which to judge someone's parenting...

[As an aside it would seem that even the 'golden rule'
 should NOT be taken as absolute.

From it you could argue for holding wild parties,
 or argue against reporting illegal behavior
 “I’m just doing what I’d want others to do for me!”^{iii]}

Realising that “Do not judge” is NOT an absolute
 seems to be sanctioned by the immediate context.

Jesus allows for the possibility that a person
 May indeed remove a speck from their brother’s eye
 Despite his earlier warning.

Now if we take this approach to the passage, to Jesus’ first statement,
 I think we can discern at least a couple clear take-aways.

The first take-away
 (which seemingly counters that opening statement)
 Is that it is necessary to exercise your judgement
 As a follower of Jesus.

Imagine that you call the police
 when you notice someone lurking in your back yard.
 And that when the police arrive they refuse to do anything,
 Saying “to each his own” or “who am I to judge”.

Most of us would be pretty angry with them.

Or imagine that a child or grandchild
 Is thinking about getting laser-eye surgery (they want to be a pilot).
 They tell you about this great deal that is being offered
 By this guy who operates out of his basement.

So, would you keep quiet when you heard about this idea?

No, you would certainly advise them to go somewhere else.

You might even set up an appointment

With someone who is licenced and legitimate.

You might even foot the bill.

Jesus advises us: “Do not give dogs what is sacred;

Do not throw your pearls to pigs”

To heed this advice, we need to recognise what is prized and valuable.

To heed this advice, we need to discern who is unfit and unworthy.

Jesus’ own words teach us that we can’t remain moral relativists.

We need to make judgements about the behavior of ourselves

And the behavior of others.

We need to discern what is bad and what is good.

That’s the first take-away.

But there’s another take-away

That you’ll need to hold in tension.

At the same time we need to recognise

That when it comes to judging others

We need to be extremely careful.

Let me say that again.

When it comes to judging others

We need to be extremely careful

When Jesus noted that we will be measured according
To the measure we use for others,
He was doing more than just reminding us
That others will hold us up to our own standards.

He was insinuating that “if you harshly judge others,
You must expect to be judged harshly by the judge of all.”^{iv}

If you need an illustration of this, just flip ahead a few chapters
And read the parable of the unforgiving servant.
Jesus makes it clear that those who have received mercy
Are expected to act merciful.

And those who refuse to show mercy...
We'll it doesn't work out very well for them.

But there are added to reasons
To be careful in in judging others.

More than being merciful,
Any quick judgements threaten to reveal hypocrisy.
And hypocrisy further reveals a lack of competence.

Ever get something in your eye?
Maybe a small bug, or a grain of sand.
Having the tiniest foreign object in your eye
Is something that you can't ignore,
And is sometimes extremely painful.

Well imagine that you are mowing your lawn
And something gets in your eye.

A neighbor sees you struggling
And offers to help you.

But you know that neighbor is legally blind.
So would you want their help?

I don't think so.

Despite you pain you know that things could be worse,
Especially if a blind man starts scraping your lens
With a cue-tip or a finger.

You could say that he is ill-suited for the job.

That's why some people run and hide
when Christians want to 'help' them with their problems.

That would-be helper boasts about a marriage of 25 years,
And talks proudly about his fidelity,
But no-one sees that marriage as one they'd want to emulate.

Followers of Jesus should be careful about sharing their opinions.
We need to make sure we see ourselves clearly
Before we start trying to help others.

Otherwise we will be seen as hypocrites,
And be regarded as unfit to provide any assistance.

What today's passage suggests is that followers of Jesus
Need to make judgement but they need to be discerning.

Maybe one rule of hand is that God's law is best applied to ourselves.

That is, it works best as a mirror
when judging our own thoughts and our actions,
But is less helpful as a magnifying glass
used to pour over the sins of others.

True there will be opportunities when we need to deal with sin,

There will be times when we are required to judge others.
When we overlook destructive patterns,
We enable them.

But any judgement of others needs to be done

In the light of the 'golden rule',
That is exercised with an overarching concern
For the person in question.

And it can only be exercised by those
who have first examined themselves.

There you go, not an easy passage;
No simple application.

Near the end of the hike my friend asserted
"the Bible seems to raise as many questions as it answers".

Underneath that that statement
Lay an expectation that the Bible is supposed
to provide simple answers to complex questions.

I'm not sure the Bible nor the life of faith is like this.

You will recall that Jacob wrestled with God
That night before he met his estranged brother.

I think that “wrestling with God”
serves as a good image for the life of faith.
It is maybe not the image we’d want or we’d choose,
I mean life is hard enough.

But keep in mind while this wrestling kept Jacob up all night
And marked him for the rest of his life,
Jacob did not leave without a blessing.

PAUSE

May God give us the courage to follow Jesus
With all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.
And though we struggle, may we also be blessed.

Amen.

ⁱ See Luke 6:37. Καταδικάζω for condemnation and κρίνω for judgement.

ⁱⁱ Proverbs 22:26 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ See Douglas R.A. Hare *Matthew* 80

^{iv} Douglas R.A. Hare *Matthew* 77