

Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church

“Christian Counterculture: Healing instead of Condemning”

Scripture: Matthew 7:1-12, John 7:53-8:11; Psalm 143: 1-8 refrain II

Hymns: Immortal, invisible, God only wise 290; Change my heart Oh God (insert);

We come to ask your forgiveness 201; Rejoice, the Lord is King 267

March 8 2015

Rev. Steve Filyk

Next week I have a dental appointment.

Because I lack a certain flair for oral care

(brushing and especially flossing)

I end up having regular dates

With my dental hygienist.

At the end of the appointment

I will hear about plaque and bleeding gums

And the dangers of gingivitis.

I will be admonished to floss daily

and because she knows I'm a poor student

she will book me for another cleaning in 4 months.

Despite the admonitions and warnings

I like my dental hygienist.

I visit her regularly.

She has a good eye for oral care.

Her diligence compensates for my poor discipline.

Most of us have that good, critical eye

In one area of life or another.

We go off to school or enter apprenticeships

To gain discernment, and good judgment.

We end up being paid for these skills.

Of course it's one thing

To visit someone

(a dental hygienist, a mechanic, a dietician)

Because we want their opinions or their assistance.

It's another to have someone

volunteer their help,

their judgement freely.

I don't know how I'd feel if the elders

Came to me with concerns about my

Tartar build-up or bad breath

And brought me a bottle of Scope to boot.

In today's Gospel reading

Jesus talks about providing assessments,

About making judgements.

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.

For with the judgement you make you will be judged,

and the measure you give will be the measure you get.”ⁱ

Now if you read that first verse,

And let your mind run with that first idea

You might think that Jesus

Would have us lose that critical eye.

I mean it says it right there

Right there in the Bible: ‘Do not judge.’

If you were able to follow along further

You might conclude that Jesus

Is just providing a common sense warning

About how people react.

Be careful: ‘For with the judgement you make

you will also be judged...’.

But if read these verses in their context,

You'll find that Jesus doesn't want us to stop assessing

nor is he simply offering us some practical wisdom.

Reading through the Sermon on the Mount

You'll quickly understand that Jesus is no hippy

Spouting ‘live and let live’.

“...Jesus rendered strong moral judgment of others
and... compelled his disciples to know the difference
between what is good and bad...”ⁱⁱ

Remember what he said about the religious leaders?
“unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”ⁱⁱⁱ

At the same time Jesus doesn't want us to fit in
But to be outstanding.
He calls us to retain our 'saltiness',
To shine brightly in darkness.^{iv}
Jesus would not have us approved by others,
but by our heavenly Father.

Yes, Jesus tells us not to judge.
But this doesn't mean
That letting go of our discernment.

Yes, Jesus tells us we will be measured
But the standard Jesus would have us most concerned about
Is God's.^v

So what exactly is Jesus suggesting?

If we continue to follow the passage
And note its subsequent emphasis on correction AND restoration
We can infer that Jesus is prohibiting
Judgement that goes the extra distance
And becomes condemnation.

This happens quite a bit.

Next time you are in a coffee shop,
Eavesdrop on your neighbors.
If they catch you,
Just tell them you're doing research for your church
(name the local United Church).

Listen in to those conversations.
Most people will be discussing the actions,
The behavior of someone.

How 'she did this' or 'he did that'.

As the behavior is reviewed,
Judgements will be made.
Judgements like 'That was a really stupid decision.'

Now the conversation could end there.
But it rarely stops with
'That was a stupid decision.'

It usually goes on to some damning statement
About the person's character.
'She's so'... 'He's so'...

Sometimes people just cut to the chase
They don't bother with the review, the analysis,
They just go straight to the condemnation:
'He is such an ass!'

Of course you don't have to go to Starbucks
To see this in action.
Most of us could just grab a voice recorder
And tape ourselves.

I know I do it.
I'm a hanging judge.

I mean there's nothing like sitting with friends
And reviewing different various cases.
Talking with others releases pent-up frustrations.
Reviewing the 'sins' of others leaves us feeling superior.
Casting judgement makes us feel powerful.

And since everyone is tried in absentia
There is no messy human conflict left to deal with in the end.

We all judge, even condemn others.
But what Scripture teaches us
Is that this is not how Jesus would have us live.

Jesus doesn't think it is proper
For us to assume that seat of his Father.

It's improper because we're not God
And we don't have all the information before us.
Most notably we can never be sure about motives.
Only God really knows a person's heart.

It's improper because we're not God.
And it's improper because we fail to meet the standards:
God's high standards, and our own lower standards.

As one commentator has noted:
"We have a fatal tendency
to exaggerate the faults of others
and minimize the gravity of our own."^{vi}

That's what today's skit was all about.

So what is the alternative.
Zip our lips.
Shut up. Keep quiet.
Stop judging and condemning.

'Live and let live'.

Well this is where the passage gets really interesting.
This is where the counter-cultural message of Jesus
Is most apparent.

We are not called to give up the exercising
Of our critical faculties when it comes
To the behavior of others.

Instead we are called to perform a critical self-examination.
We are called to confess our own failings.
And then we are called to address the misbehaviour
Of our sister or brother
In order that it might be corrected
And that the relationship might be
restored.

Jesus puts it more succinctly:

"...first take the log out of your own eye,
and then you will see clearly
to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye."^{vii}

Sounds fairly straight-forward.

But there is more to it than that.
This verse on its own could lead us to think
That if our lives are clean in one area
We have the authorisation to request, even demand
That everyone else tidy up their own lives.

'This year I was finally honest on my tax return
So now I'm gonna make sure all my friends & family
Do the same.'

This is where I think we need to re-read our verses
Through Jesus' summary and at the end of today's lesson:
"In everything (ie judging and restoring) do to others
as you would have them do to you..."^{viii}

Jesus is not asking us to be blind in our judgments,
Jesus is calling us to be critical but generous.
The aim is not condemnation
But addressing bad behavior with integrity;
lovingly restoring whoever has caused offence.

So what does that look like?
I'm not quite sure.

My guess it is something that we have to try,
even fail, to develop a bit of competence.

But let's just imagine a silly scenario
Where we could put Jesus' principles to work.

Say you had a co-worker with bad breath, horrible halitosis.
Say that it was affecting your ability to work with him.

What would you do?

You could gossip about it.
Maybe after being trapped with him
In a small office
You would need some one-on-one counselling.

But while this lets off steam
it wouldn't address the problem.

Other approaches?

You could leave an anonymous note
Taped to a bottle of mouthwash.
You leave a formal complaint with your union rep.

These options might remedy the particular problem.
But when your handiwork is discovered
You will realise you sacrificed your relationship.
Sledgehammers don't fix relationships!

So what about Jesus' approach?

You might take a personal survey
Of some of your own bad habits and tendencies
Habits that might be regarded as a nuisance by others.

You might spend some time thinking
About how you'd prefer someone else
To bring up a sensitive issue with you.

All of this might lead to a gentle discussion
With the co-worker in question.
A conversation which addresses (among other things):
How you value the relationship,
Mistakes you have made in the past,
And that concern about bad breath.

In the end this approach may not
Provide the solution you were looking for.
But Jesus would have us choose that loving option
Even if it means we fail.

*Let's pray:
Loving God
We all have a hard time getting along with others.
We don't like conflict even though we know it's an inevitable
Part of living in community.
Help us to know how to best handle our disagreements.
To know when we need to speak up and when we need to keep silent.
To check our own motivations and to watch our hearts.
Help us to truly love and respect each other as your beloved children
May this respect surround and enshroud all our difficult conversations
So that they may be marked by love.
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

ⁱ Matthew 7:1-2 NRSV

ⁱⁱ Scot McKnight The Sermon on the Mount 228

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 5:20 NRSV

^{iv} See Matthew 5:13,14

^v See R. T. France Matthew 142 In light of being judged or measured "the passive... probably conceals God himself as the agent."

^{vi} John R. W. Stott *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* 178

^{vii} Matthew 7:5 NRSV

^{viii} Matthew 7:12 NRSV