

JUDGING, LIKE CHARITY, BEGINS AT HOME

Scriptures: Matthew 7:1-6, I John 4:1-6

We were living in Potlatch, Idaho, when my son for the first time noticed someone smoking. He pointed to a man on the street and said, "What's that in his mouth?" I think he thought it was some kind of treat. "That is a cigarette," I said in a hushed voice. "He is smoking, but he shouldn't. It can make him sick." The next time my son saw someone smoking he grabbed my arm and said, "Look, that man is smoking. He shouldn't." I told him to lower his voice, but I was pleased that he had learned this lesson.

One day, however, we were at a potluck at the Lutheran Church in Potlatch, where I was the pastor along with being the pastor of the Presbyterian Church. We were sitting across from a man in bib overalls who had a pack of cigarettes in his pocket. Suddenly my son pointed at them and said to the man, "What are those?" The man said, "These? Well, uh, they're cigarettes." Before I could stop him, my son said to me in a voice that carried across the room, "That man smokes, and he shouldn't." It didn't help that he was talking about the president of the Lutheran congregation.

To me that scene illustrates the problem. How do you hold meaningful beliefs or values without in some sense judging other people? How do you tell your children that smoking is bad without in some sense judging someone who smokes?

I would like to ask Jesus that question. In our second scripture reading Jesus says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." But it is quite clear that Jesus does a lot of judging. In Matthew 7:6 Jesus says, "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine." I am not exactly sure what that means, and neither were two of the commentaries I read. But it is quite clear in that verse that Jesus is judging people.

Later in Matthew chapter 7, verse 15, Jesus says, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." Doesn't that sound like judging? It reminds me of our second scripture reading from I John 4. John says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world." Isn't that judging? Do not John and even Jesus want us to distinguish right from wrong, true from false? What does Jesus mean when he says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged"?

Two points: First, when Jesus demonstrates judging in the gospel of Matthew, he focuses more on actions than persons. Let me use two examples. Earlier in the spring we read an extended discussion by Jesus in Matthew 18 about confronting people. In Matthew 18:15 Jesus says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one." The idea here is not to condemn the person but to deal with the *actions* of that person that has caused harm. The goal is not to condemn the person but to be reconciled.

Recall also what Jesus said in Matthew 7:15: “Beware of false prophets ... you will know them by their fruits.” The focus of judging should be on the *actions* of people rather than on their personhood.

This is proven by another scripture passage we read this spring. Jesus tells a parable about a field that is full of wheat and weeds. The workers want to go through the field and pluck out all the weeds, but Jesus says, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.”

Jesus does not call us to judge people. That is left for God. When I am asked whether a person from another religion can be saved, I say, “That’s not my call.” When I am asked whether a person can be saved who has lived a completely dissolute life, someone who has ignored God and cared about no one other than himself—when I am asked whether such a person can be saved I say, “That’s above my pay grade.” We are not here to judge people, only actions. And the goal of judging actions is not to separate ourselves from other people or put ourselves above other people but to be reconciled with them. That’s why if we confronting someone and he or she does not listen to us, Jesus says, “Take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by two or three witnesses.” Jesus tells us to do this not in order to gang up on the other person but to check our own perception of the situation. Sometimes *we* may be the person who is wrong. Sometimes we need other people to help us judge our own perspective on a situation before we judge anyone else.

And that brings me to point number two. Point number one: focus on actions, not personhood. Point number two: start with yourself. Jesus makes that point clearly in Matthew 7:5: “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.”

There is a great story in Donald Miller’s book *Blue Like Jazz*. He says that one year a group of Christian students at Reed College in Oregon decided to set up a booth during a student festival called Ren Fayre. Ren Fayre was a student festival at Reed College that usually turned into a beer drinking, pot smoking orgy, so Donald Miller jokingly suggested they set up a confession booth. The other students in the group laughed, but suddenly their friend Tony said, “That’s perfect.” Don Miller stared at him. “Tony,” he said, “we’re not going to do this.” Tony smiled, “Oh, we are Don. We are going to build a confession booth!” Don Miller continues the story:

“Okay, you guys, [Tony said], here’s the catch.” He leaned in a little and collected his thoughts. “We are not actually going to accept confession ... we are going to confess to them. We are going to confess that, as followers of Jesus, we have not been very loving; we have been bitter, and for that we are sorry. We will apologize for the Crusades, we will apologize for televangelists, we will apologize for neglecting the poor and the lonely, we will ask them to forgive us, and we will tell them that in our selfishness, we have misrepresented Jesus on this campus. We will tell people who come into the booth that Jesus loves them” (p. 118).

So that's what they did. They built a confession booth in the middle of the Reed College campus during one of the wildest party weekends of the year, and invited students to come in and hear Christians confess to them their sins.

The results were interesting. Don Miller was sitting in the confession booth when the first student came in, a young man named Jake. Here is what happened:

"So, what is this? I'm supposed to tell you all the juicy gossip I did at Ren Fayre, right?" Jake said.

"No."

"Okay, then what? What's the game?" ...

[I replied] "There is this group of us on campus who wanted to confess to you."

"You are confessing to me!" Jake said with a laugh.

"Yeah. We are confessing to you. I mean, I am confessing to you."

"You're serious." His laugh turned to something of a straight face. ... "What are you confessing?" he asked. ...

"There's a lot. I will keep it short," I started. "Jesus said to feed the poor and to heal the sick. I have never done very much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out, especially if I feel threatened, you know, if my ego gets threatened. Jesus did not mix His spirituality with politics. I grew up doing that. It got in the way of the central message of Christ. I know that was wrong, and I know that a lot of people will not listen to the words of Christ because people like me who know Him, carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than just relaying the message Christ wanted to get across. There's a lot more, you know."

"It's all right, man," Jake said, very tenderly. His eyes were starting to water.

"Well," I said, clearing my throat, "I am sorry for all of that."

"I forgive you," Jake said. And he meant it. ... [Then he said] "You really believe in Jesus, don't you?"

"Yes, I think I do. Most often I do. I have doubts at times, but mostly I believe in Him. It's like there is something in me that causes me to believe, and I can't explain it."

[Jake pondered this then said] "You said earlier that there was a central message of Christ. I don't really want to become a Christian, you know, but what is that message?" (pp. 122-124).

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." Jesus is not asking us to quit believing in right and wrong. He is not asking us to quit believing in truth and falsehood. He is asking us to judge actions rather than people and to start with ourselves.

- Ken Onstot
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