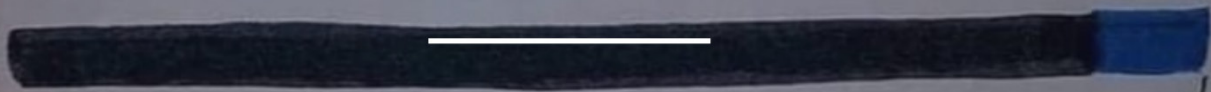


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# “The More We Judge, The Less We Love”

Matthew 7:1-5

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*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? 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.*

*Matthew 7:1-5*

I grew up in a home where we believed that anyone who touched an illegal drug was working for the devil. I was twelve when Nancy Reagan was the guest star on a very special episode of *Different Strokes*. She told us, in no uncertain terms, to "Just say no!" The president's wife warned us that it is not enough not to do drugs ourselves. Nancy wanted us to keep our distance from all the horrible, terrible, no good, evil people who had tasted the devil's lettuce.

My church taught me that greedy people, misogynists, and racists were not nearly as bad as those who have tried marijuana. As far as I could tell, everyone in my church believed it. To be blunt, the war on drugs was, for us, the war on people who liked drugs. Mandatory drug sentences were incredibly harsh when compared with lighter sentences for crimes like abusing your spouse. I avoided drugs not just because I knew that if I ever puffed the magic dragon, I would immediately be overcome with reefer madness and die, but also because I did not want to be one of the horrible, terrible, no good, evil people.

A few weeks ago, I am visiting our son, so I google “Ten best tourist attractions in Denver.” I have lived in New York long enough to be arrogant about it. It does not take long. I believe our museums are better, our parks are bigger, and our theater is far superior, but we do not have the #7 attraction in Denver, the International Church of Cannabis.

Plymouth’s services are available online, so I feel, and perhaps I should not feel this, but I feel the need to say that while I have no judgmental feelings toward members of the International Church of Cannabis, I have not, up to this point in my life, partaken in their holy sacrament. The only joint I have ever rolled is my ankle. I realize this makes me seem old and stodgy, and suggests that I have lived a sheltered life, but I am old and stodgy. I have lived a sheltered life.

Caleb and I go with no expectations. We get there twenty minutes early, so we go first to the fellowship hall. The church looks like the Lutheran Church it used to be, but there are video games, chess boards, foosball, a popcorn machine, and tie-dye t-shirts for sale. People are having fun. Caleb and I play on a ping pong table made from a tree that is not regulation size. We enjoy a little skee-ball. He likes it when I let him win.

We walk through “Gandhi’s Graffiti Garden,” which is decorated with quotes from Mahatma Gandhi: “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.” “When I admire the wonders of a sunset or the beauty of the moon, my soul expands in the worship of the creator.”

The usher who welcomes us in the sanctuary has more blue hair, tattoos, and feathers than most of our ushers, and

she is every bit as friendly. The light show and meditation begins with a quote from Søren Kierkegaard: “Prayer does not change God, but it changes the one who prays.” We hear Laurence Fishburne from *The Matrix* ask, “Do you want to take the blue pill or the red pill?” I can never remember which is the right answer.

The 40-minute laser program includes songs from the 60s about loving one another and doing drugs: Magic Carpet Ride, White Rabbit, and Purple Haze. Their sanctuary has brighter colors than ours—more purple and orange, less brown and white. They have fewer pews and more bean bags, but there are no jazz cigarettes in sight.

After the show is over, I have a conversation with a cheerful church member who explains: “We have employees, but no paid clergy. The light show pays the bills. The only time we allow pot in the building is on Friday night from seven to nine, when we have a sacramental service for adult members. We have a monthly gathering for non-members with no cannabis.”

I want to make a joke about saying “Hail Mary Janes,” but think better of it and ask, “How has the church dealt with opposition?”

“When we were just starting, someone heard that the neighbors on either side of the church were unhappy, so we started mowing their lawns. That’s worked.”

We talked long enough for it to be clear that people go to his church for many of the same reasons people go to our church. They want friends to share their lives with. They want their lives to be more meaningful. They want to work together to help the needy. I have no desire to join the International Church of Cannabis, but the people I met

were not the horrible, terrible, no good, evil people I was taught to fear.

Most of us are guilty of placing people in categories—good or evil, friends or strangers, or people we love or people we fear. Dividing into categories does not make much sense, except, maybe there actually are two types of people—those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who do not.

When we judge others, it does not define who they are, but it defines who we are. We become people who judge. When we judge, it is about our insecurities, limitations, and needs. When we judge, we reveal a broken part of ourselves.

We judge by how far people have to go, without noticing how far they have come. We judge by a past that no longer exists, or we judge by the chapter we walked in on. We often judge people we know the least the most. We judge people by the worst moment in their lives.

We judge on the basis of other people's judgments. We judge people for trying to do things we are afraid to try. We are lawyers for our own mistakes and judges for others' mistakes. God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world, so it is probably not our job either.

Some of the stories about Jesus are hard to believe—walking on water, turning water into merlot, and feeding 5000 from a boy's sack lunch—but this one really strains our credulity: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged."

How is that even possible? Judging is like breathing. We start judging when we wake up and judge our way through the day. Who is worthy of a smile and a "Good morning"?

Who do we judge interesting enough to stop and talk to?  
Who do we consider good enough to eat lunch with?

We judge our neighbors—nice because they wave, but mostly leave us alone, or a pain because their parties are too loud and they do not invite us. We do not want to go, but they should invite us. We judge our relatives—the good ones who vote like we do and the bad ones we lost to an evil cable news network. We judge churches—the smart ones that worship like we do and the embarrassing ones who make Christians look stupid.

And yet, Jesus says, “Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, or criticize their faults, unless of course, you want the same treatment. Being critical has a way of boomeranging. It’s easy to see a smudge on your neighbor’s face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Should you even be saying, ‘Let me wipe that smudge off your face’ when your own face is distorted by contempt?”

“We act like appearance is everything. We act holier than thou instead of being holy. We should start by wiping the ugly sneer off our own face.”

Jesus understands the way we deal with others, looking for specks in their eyes. We want to blame them for what they are doing, or even who they are. We ignore God’s love and offer judgment.

We tell ourselves that the person we are looking down on really is inferior. They are not up to our standards. We think our place is above others, so we feel justified when we find fault. We think it is okay for us to do this, because we want to feel important. We like feeling like we are better than others. We do not see how dreadfully wrong

we are when we act superior.

You are walking through the woods and see a little dog under a tree.

You start to pet the dog, but the dog lunges at you. His fangs are out. He is being aggressive. You go from being friendly to being angry. Then you see that the dog's leg is caught in some kind of trap. Your heart shifts. When we look at one another with God's compassion, our heart shifts. We realize that the people who bother us have unmet needs. They need to feel seen, feel loved, and feel safe. We can offer more forgiveness and more compassion. We can recognize that when people are at their worst, they feel caught in a trap. (Happiness Lab, 1/11/21)

None of us knows everything that is going on in another's life. That is such an important thing to realize and such an easy thing to forget. We are terrible at judging. We do not know other people's pain.

Everyone has a complicated story. There is a reason they are the way they are. Everyone has pain and sadness that make them see things differently than we do.

Be curious and not judgmental, because most are doing about the best they can. Everyone is struggling, so we look for goodness and try to understand. We listen to ideas that are different from our own. We ask questions. We figure out what is going on beneath the surface. We make sure there is nothing we have done that might have been misinterpreted. We look to see if there are ways we can make things better. Judging others may feel normal, but it keeps us from giving our hearts to God.

Jesus says we will live healthier, happier lives when we learn not to judge. Our self-righteousness keeps us

from seeing that we are all in God's hands. If God can be trusted, then we do not need to waste our days being judgmental, because God will take care of us all. When we believe in God's love for others, we believe in God's love for us.

We do not need to judge, and we do not need to think about others' judgment. Many of the wounds we have suffered came from someone who judged us, criticized us, pushed us aside, wrote us off, and rejected us. When we stop passing judgements on others, we stop worrying about their judgments on us.

Jesus was able to love everyone, even when they angered him, disappointed him, or broke his heart, because love is the absence of judgment. If we give up on judgment, we will be shaped by love rather than disappointment. When we clear out judgment, we create room for love. God longs for us to realize how much better off we are without judgment.

The TV show *Ted Lasso* is about a soccer team in England. In one episode, Isaac, a star player, reacts to a fan's taunting, which includes a gay slur, by charging into the stands and confronting the fan. He gets himself thrown out of the game. The assistant coach, Roy Kent, has to face the press afterward and answer questions about what got into McAdoo, and whether the team stands behind him for having run into the stands.

Roy says, "What a stupid ... question. Of course, we don't condone it. What Isaac did was awful. ... But none of us knows what's going on in each other's lives. So, for Isaac to do what he did today, even though it was wrong, I give him love. And as for why he did what he did, that's none of my ... business. Next question."



If you watch the show, you know that I have edited out the F-bombs that are part of Roy Kent's charm, but the sentiment sounds like it is from Jesus. The way to react is to give love.

Going cold turkey and not judging at all is asking a lot. Maybe we can start small. We can try not to pick on people out loud, and hope it leads to thinking less judgmental thoughts. We can be kind about others' failures and make a point of remembering our mistakes. We can go a day—or an hour—without criticizing anyone.

We can remember that judgments are boomerangs. Sometimes we end up with a log in our eye. Going a day without throwing anything at anyone would free us up to see more clearly. We might see that Jesus is right. We do not have to judge anymore.

*sermon © Brett Younger*