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Judge Not"? Why Not

Matthew 7:1-5 "Judge not, so that you may not be judged. 2 For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. 3 Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? 4 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? 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."

Ephesians 4:15-16 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

The sayings of Jesus have long been treasured by the Church. Even those who are not Christians have often found great wisdom in them. Religions who don't see Jesus as divine – like Judaism or Islam – nonetheless honor and recognize Jesus as a teacher, a prophet. In fact, of course, in Jesus' own day the title very often used of him by the gospel writers is "rabbi" or "teacher." A few of Jesus' teachings and sayings are found in all four of the gospels, many are found in two or three of the gospels, and a handful are found in just one of the gospels. In fact, many scholars believe that one of the very first written things that circulated in the earliest days of the church in the mid-first century was a compilation of his sayings. These were then incorporated in one form or another in the gospels we have today. And so many of those sayings are surely and beautifully and often though-provokingly true. But there are some other ones, aren't there, some "hard" ones, where understanding doesn't come nearly so easily. Today's scripture contains one of those more difficult sayings. Jesus's words have been used and abused, quoted and misquoted by folks some of whom probably had no idea that they are from Jesus. So, let us see what more we can learn of our faith through this short scripture this morning.

Some of you know that earlier in my life I taught evening classes in philosophy at a

local university in Indiana. "Introduction to Philosophy" is the course I most often taught. And much of that course was devoted to both philosophy of religion and ethics. Now, philosophy has a reputation as either being hard or irrelevant, but in actual fact it is more about learning how to ask important questions well, seeing that others have struggled with the same questions that you have, giving you some tools for thinking about these, and learning how to try to give good reasons for the things you think – thereby helping you avoid simply being claimed by those who shout the loudest. At the end of the ethics section one year, one of the examples our textbook raised was this: imagine a culture in which the systematic torture of certain kinds of persons was encouraged. A terrible example, to be sure, but it was there to make a point and to get the students to both think about that cultural practice and to be able to give reasons, and not just feelings, for an assessment of it. One student, I recall, answered eloquently about how such a practice would be wrong and that no human being should ever be treated that way; he indeed gave some very good reasons to justify his perspective. But then came his distressing conclusion: *"But that's just my own subjective experience," he said, "and while it would be wrong for me it might not be wrong for everybody. After all, everybody has a right to their own opinions, and even Jesus said we should never judge others."*

Well, did he really? Did Jesus say – or mean – that you shouldn't judge your brother or sister, should judge this or that practice or law or procedure – period? I don't think so. For look at the opening of the passage again: *"Judge not, so that you may not be judged."* Or, as another translation has it, *"Pass no judgment yourself and you will not be judged either."* And then the passage goes on to say that those who fail to see their own failings and sin but ardently point out the failings and sins of others are hypocrites. And the passage finishes this way: *"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."* Now, is Jesus really saying *"Don't judge – period"*? I don't think so. For that last verse clearly implies that part of the end result, the goal, is to in fact to be able indeed to point out whatever it is that is

keeping our neighbors from seeing clearly! But – Jesus is saying – you have to do so always with an awareness of your own failures and faults and with the intention and attempt to rid yourself of what ever is blinding you. Then you can – and apparently should! – help your neighbor do the same. Yet why is it that my student – and even you and I sometimes – persist on occasion in misinterpreting Jesus’ words here, mentally stopping after the first verse, the first two words, “Judge not”?

Well, if we’re honest, stopping with the first verse can give us a kind of out when life is hard and we are confronted by things we should do but don’t want to. After all, look at the logic of Jesus’ words here: *“Judge not, and you will not be judged. For as you judge others so will you yourselves be judged.”* Do you hear it? On the one hand, this can easily be read as saying that if **you** never expect anyone else to live up to certain standards, then nobody can expect you to either! Such an attitude can no doubt make life easier at times, for then you can say, in effect, *“Look, I don’t expect much from you and so you’ve no right to expect much from me.”* That’s both safer and easier, isn’t it? After all, if you don’t get into the game, you don’t have to play or risk making errors. If you don’t expect others to be good or moral or loving or charitable to their neighbors, then they can’t ask that of you either. But, on the other hand, these verses can just as easily be read as saying that if we **DO** indeed choose to play, to stand up for our judgements about others, then we need to expect – and we even welcome – being judged by those same standards ourselves.

So do you see how these verses can cut in two entirely different directions? **Either** Jesus can be interpreted as saying play it safe, don’t offer an opinion, don’t make any moral claims and then none can be made on you, **or** he can be interpreted as saying **DO** judge, do make your standards and values known – with humility and self-awareness to be sure – and then expect to be called to try to live up them yourselves too. My friends, if our passage stopped here with the first verse, you really could see it either way couldn’t you: Is it “Judge” or is it “Judge not”?

But of course the passage doesn't stop there – and, by the way, this is again why, as I mentioned last week, it is crucial to take Bible verses in their full context, for if you are content to simply pluck isolated words here and there you can, as so many have noted, make the Bible say most anything. And so we need to continue on, not mentally stopping at “Judge not” and we can't avoid the fact that Jesus ends up telling us that we do in fact have not just the option, but a **duty** to our neighbor to judge that speck in his or her eye. But how does Jesus get there? Well, he gets there by talking about our all-too-common human ability to deceive ourselves when we how easily we sometimes judge others without **expecting** to be judged ourselves. It's as if we wanted a sort of diplomatic immunity for the very things we dish out. But Jesus won't let us do that. Instead he says, in essence, that yes, part of one's Christian responsibility to one's neighbor, one's friend, one's family, one's fellow church member is to offer our assessment of when they are going astray but we can only do so with two things in mind: First, Jesus is telling us that when we do judge others we must always and only do so with an awareness of our own tendency to sin, with humility. Secondly, He is pointing out that we need to stay aware of the fact that sometimes what we condemn most vigorously in others is exactly what we most fear in ourselves – and that the more loudly we judge others the less we'll have to honestly face the very same thing in ourselves. Psychologists have a fancy word for this: “projection” – that all too human tendency to “project” onto others what we most fear or dislike about ourselves. And, by the way, haven't we all known people like that? – the person who heartily judges others for not living up to the law or the rules who is actually afraid of her own tendencies to skirt the rules? Or the person who judges others harshly for being “irrational” is actually someone who is afraid of his tendencies to want to follow his instincts and emotions. Again, by putting the judgment on the other person, they don't have to face it in themselves. They can look for the specks without ever looking for their own logs.

Now, there is one more thing to consider as we try to plumb the depths of this “hard saying” of Jesus. The reality is this: you simply cannot go through life without making all sorts of judgements in every single moment. To simply say, “Well, judge not” is just not even possible. You can’t drive two blocks down the street without having made a dozen judgment calls. To live is to judge; to live is to be constantly deciding to do one thing and not another, to assess, this person, or situation, or opportunity, or behavior as better or worse. And so one of the things that this passage is finally telling us is that in a life where you have to judge and where you are indeed called to judge in the hopes of bettering the world for the sake of God, you have to take **responsibility** for your judgements. You and I cannot hide behind what “everybody” thinks – because, after all, everybody might have logs in their eyes! When our children were younger, they would sometimes try to justify some behavior with “well, everyone was doing it.” I always thought my answer was really clever: “If everyone was falling down the stairs would you do it too?” They were never as impressed with my cleverness as I was, though. To live is to judge and to live well and honorably is to take responsibility for those judgments and to make those judgements with an awareness of our own tendencies to sin.

Sometimes those moments of judgment are those hundreds of small, everyday things. But occasionally, in your life or mine, there comes a big moment of judgment, a very large opportunity to remove both logs and specks. I’m sure that many of you recall Mark Twain’s book Huckleberry Finn; it has a scene with one of those huge judgments. Huck and the slave Jim are on their raft floating down the Mississippi. But are running from society. Huck is running from a world that tried, in his word, to “civilize” him. Jim is running from a society that, in the name of such “civilization,” had made a slave of him. Huck is trying to decide whether to turn Jim in or not. Society and “civilization” tell him that he should do so. And so he struggles, there on the raft with what to do, what judgment to make. And in that process he clears, indeed, the logs from his own eyes and thus is enabled to see clearly the logs in the eyes of all of those who believe it is

permissible to buy and sell human beings. When eventually his chance comes to turn Jim in, he decides he will not do it. And instead of mailing the letter to his aunt telling her where Jim can be found, he tears it up and says “Alright, then, I’ll just go to hell.” It was a lonely moment of decision, a big moment of judging in which he was alone with the responsibility of judging. “Judge not” was not an option. And so – having gone through the process of coming to see clearly – he indeed judged, and judged well.

We come near the end of this teaching, this “hard saying,” of Jesus. And what started out looking like we maybe shouldn’t judge at all actually ends up telling us that we do indeed in fact have the responsibility for judging, for taking the speck out of our brother’s or sister’s eye. But you just can’t do that very well, says Jesus, if your own eyes don’t see very well, if you are blinded to your own failings. We are called by this passage to see others clearly and for what they truly are, but we are reminded that we just can’t do that very well if we can’t first see ourselves clearly. Does that mean that you or I absolutely have to have everything together, be perfectly faultless on the flaw front before we can make any judgments of others? No, of course not. If that were so, humanity would never make any progress and nothing good would ever get done. God uses flawed people all the time to call bad behavior, poor choices, and wrong patterns to account. Thank goodness! But it does mean that we need to do our judging, to use the church’s old word, “confessionally” – that is, we always do so first by honestly attempting to see if and where we are being hypocrites, if and where our own failings that we could indeed try to fix are going unnoticed by us, and if and where we could stand a little self-judgment ourselves.

Let me close this way. The church is always called to be both a community of grace and a community of judgment. We shy away, though – and rightly so! – from that latter word because it has been so profoundly misused by too many people on too many

occasions, judging others harshly and even gleefully for things that matter less to God than they think! And yet at the same time, don't all of us want the church, of all places, to be where we are indeed challenged, where we are indeed called to grow past prejudices, where we are indeed invited to see more clearly the ways that all God's children are to be one family and the ways that we might be hindering that? I hope so. I am grateful for a church that over the six decades of my life has never let me rest easy in my own parochialisms and provincialisms, never let me get away for long with being satisfied with being in any way a hypocrite. For, as that old saying has it, "God loves us just as we are, and God loves us too much to leave us where we are." But how do we talk about how to move forward, how do we talk about the things, the patterns, the behavior in your life or mine that are less than they could be? We do it the way Paul counseled: speaking the truth in love. And that means that you and I are called to be gently honest – both with ourselves and with one another. For honesty without gentleness can become brutality, and gentleness without honesty can be shallow. But together they can be powerful. With gentle honesty, then, seeking after truth, let us look for the specks and logs in our own eyes and even in those of others. But let us always, always do so with humility, with mutual grace, and with a hope that our efforts will redound to the glory, the hope, and the mission of God. May it be so. Amen.