



Judge Not

TEXT
Matthew 7:1-5

July 26, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

These verses fall in the middle of the “Sermon on the Mount.” The Sermon on the Mount is a word painting of what life looks like in the promised day of God. This holy imagining is filled with examples of life lived in a way that seems foreign and confusing, but also winsome and beautiful.

Jesus says, “If you want to know who is blessed, look at the ones with a broken heart for every moment they yearn for things to be different. Look for those who are hungry, not for power or wealth but for righteousness, for they are the ones who see God. Or look to those who are sacrificing for peace, for they have still not given up.”

Jesus said, in the promised day of God, it will not be unusual to go the second mile, or turn the other cheek, or to have such confidence in God that the daily needs that cause us anxiety will seem insignificant. And you won’t judge one another, for you will be so concerned about repairing your own soul, you won’t have time to be concerned about your neighbor’s failing.

It’s this last word of wisdom about judging that I am drawn to. I am drawn to it because it’s

not my place to pass judgment on others. Yet, I admit, I have also battled this word all my life. It’s hard to look at all that is wrong in the world and say, “Well, who am I to judge?” That doesn’t feel like righteousness; it feels like apathy.

Ferrol Sams is a writer of Southern fiction. He begins his short story titled “Judgment” this way: *I have been going to church at least once a week all my life. Been singing in the choir ever since I was thirteen and turned out to be an alto. After all that religion I’ve been exposed to, the hardest thing yet for me to do as a Christian is to judge not lest I be judged.*

It seems to me that if you don’t judge in your own mind and always leave it up to God to judge, then you also don’t punish and leave that up to God, too. Then it seems like that’d lock you into putting up with just about anything from just about anybody, and that is stretching Christian tolerance too cotton-picking thin, and I can’t do it.

To tell the truth, there are times when I enjoy it. ... I enjoy speculating on how close the Lord and I are on our opinions about some things and some folks.¹

This unnamed Southern alto has a point.

With the world as it is, you wonder if there should be a limit to Christian tolerance. Tom Long says it this way. “If someone is ... abusing children ... or spreading vicious rumors in the community, are we to look the other way, throw up our hands and say, ‘It’s not my business.’”² I’m not to judge. No. That’s not faithful.

Judge not ... this is not a rule. It doesn’t work as a rule. Make this a rule, and it will stretch Christian tolerance too cotton-picking thin. Make it a rule and it will bless anyone who looks evil and injustice in the eye and just turns away. If I understand the text, this teaching is not a rule; it’s an orientation. It begins by asserting that when it comes to sin, we are all infected, and the place to start mending what has gone wrong in the world is not with our neighbor, but with ourselves.

Jesus said, “Worry about the log in your own eye.” That’s an image. I have never had a literal log in my eye. I’ve had an eyelash in my eye, and that alone can make it pretty hard to see; but a log? That must leave you blind.

That’s the point. One of the struggles we have in seeing sin is that when it’s my neighbor’s sin,

I've got 20/20 vision. But when it's my own, my vision is blurry. My neighbor's misdeeds are just that, bad acts. But my bad acts always have reasons, explanations. They are often excused with good intentions. By the time I finish my mental justifications, my sins aren't even really sins. At least that's the way I see it — or should I say, the way I see it with a log in my eye.

But what if I'm blind and don't know it?

The Bible talks about blindness a lot. It's a metaphor for spiritual struggle. There is a difference between physical blindness and spiritual blindness. This will sound so basic it almost sounds silly, but people who are physically blind, they know they are blind. But when we are spiritually blind, we often have no idea. We still see what we see, and we assume what we see is the truth. But what if we have a log in our eye? To be blind and assume we see is the deepest blindness.

In recent months, Village has made available anti-racism resources on our website because the country is in the midst of a conversation about systemic racism in our country. This has been an effort to listen, to try to see our shared life the way people of color so often see it. It's an effort, as St. Francis prayed, seeking to understand before being understood.

And it's uncomfortable because it's natural for us to speak our truth, to assert what we see. But when it comes to talking about the realities of racism, I'm not sure we should be doing the talking. The truth is, I have never

experienced racism. So, what authority do I have to talk about what I have never experienced? I would never try to tell a woman what it is like to give birth, for example, because I really have no experience there. When it comes to the experience of racism, my experience is not the determiner of truth. No, I need to listen to discover where I might have a log in my eye.

And that forfeiture of power is hard. But Jesus says it's also healing.

We are in divided times. Everywhere we turn, there is a battle over truth. When division emerges, our temptation is to determine what side of an argument or an issue is the right side. We determine what is right, and by definition then discern those who are wrong. And we should determine what is right.

But we should also recognize being right is not enough; we are called to be righteous, and righteousness is a relational category. To be righteous is not about our purity of position on the issues; it's about how we are with others.

That is why Jesus says that you might want to look again, particularly when you know how right you are, to see if you are righteous — because sometimes when we are looking at ourselves, our vision gets blurred by all our explanations, justification and balm of good intentions.

It takes humility, and that's not a popular virtue these days. But it is a faithful one.

So, sometimes in marriages, and in families, and in friendships, and even as citizens, we need to be willing to set our

narrative aside for a while. It might remove a log we didn't even know was there, and help us learn again the meaning of the old hymn, "I once was blind, but now I see."

Judge not ... pay attention to the log in your own eye. It's not a rule, but in the promised day of God, a day toward which we are living every day, it is our orientation. It's part of what can ensure we are not only right, but also righteous.

¹Ferrol Sams, *The Widow's Mite* (1987), p. 63f

²Thomas Long, *Matthew: Westminster Book Companion* (1997), p. 77

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.