

THE JUMP TO JUDGMENT

Matthew 7:1-6

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Text only, no service due to COVID-19 Pandemic

Second Sunday after Pentecost

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Jesus' words today could not be more fitting than in our current situation; we as a country are so divided on so many issues that face us. We make so many judgments based upon which source we read or listen to without checking out the facts.

It reminds me of a story. A Mr. Jones picked up the wrong umbrella in a hotel, and the umbrella's rightful owner called his attention to it. Embarrassed, Mr. Jones offered his apologies, picked up the right one, and went on his way. But the incident served to remind Mr. Jones that he had promised to buy umbrellas for his wife and daughter, so he went across the street to a store and purchased one for each of them. As he came out from the store and began to get in his car - THREE umbrellas on his arm now - the man whose umbrella Mr. Jones had mistakenly taken happened to be coming out of the hotel and saw him. He eyed poor old Jones suspiciously and said wryly, "Hmmm, I see you had a good day after all."

OOPS! Someone has observed that the most exercise many people get is jumping to conclusions---THE JUMP TO JUDGMENT! It is obviously not a new problem. It has been around for thousands of years. Even Jesus had something to say about it. You just heard him: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged."

This was not something startling to those listening on that hillside that day. Many a time their Rabbis warned people against judging others. "He who judges his neighbor favorably," they said, "will be judged favorably by God." They said that there were six great works which brought a person credit in this world and profit in the world to come—(1) study, (2) visiting the sick, (3) hospitality, (4) devotion in prayer, (5) the education of children in the Law, and (6) thinking the best of other people. The Jews knew that kindness in judgment is nothing less than a sacred

duty. You'll have to admit, these are pretty good rules to live by.

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." Now, to be sure, there is more in this teaching of the Lord's than simply an admonition about coming to rash conclusions. There is a word about condemning without knowing enough about people, a word about condemning without knowing enough about a situation and, in general, a word about how little we really know anyway...words of which we need to be reminded during this period of un-rest in our lives.

Why do we need to be careful about making judgments? There are some practical considerations obviously. As our friend in the hotel demonstrates, we very often do not know the whole story.

A writer once told of a situation that had occurred early in his career. "When I was young and pretty much satisfied with myself, I spent a college vacation looking for what I called 'local color' for use in a book I planned to write. My main character was to be drawn from an impoverished, shiftless community, and I believed I knew just where to find it. Sure enough, one day I came upon the place, made to order with its run-down farms, seedy men and washed out women. To top it off, the epitome of the shiftlessness I had envisioned was waiting for me near an unpainted shack, in the shape of a scraggly-bearded old man in faded overalls who was hoeing around a little patch of potatoes while SITTING in a CHAIR. I started back to my rooming house, just itching to get at my typewriter. But as I made the turn in the dirt road which ran past the cabin, I looked at the scene from another angle. And when I did, I saw something which stopped me in my tracks. From THAT side I observed, leaning against the chair, a pair of crutches, and I noticed an empty overall leg hanging limply to the ground. In that instant, the lazy, shiftless character I had seen was transformed into a figure of dauntless courage." The writer concluded, "Since that hour I have never judged a man after only one look or

conversation with him. And I thank God that I turned for a second look."

There is another aspect to this issue. Our judgments are often made despite our lack of knowledge of the entire situation. For example, is stealing wrong? We would say, "Of course!" But you remember Victor Hugo's novel Les Miserables. The hero, Jean Valjean was in trouble because of stealing. He stole a loaf of bread. But, WHY? He had no other way to feed his little girl. Can we judge that kind of stealing in the same way as we would judge stealing in other circumstances? I don't think so! The famous Rabbi Hillel said, "Do not judge a man until you yourself have come into his circumstances or situation." The fact is that if we realized what some people have to go through, so far from condemning them, we would be amazed that they have succeeded in being as good as they are.

We are NOT all-knowing...in spite of what we would like to think. You are familiar with Thomas Alva Edison, unquestionably America's most prolific inventor. Young "Al" (as his mother called him) started out as a somewhat frail lad, thought to be hardly able to manage school. In fact, he only had three months of formal education before his teacher decided the boy was retarded and could not manage the life of the mind. Right!

We do not know the whole story; we do not know the entire situation; we surely do not know everything. These are good reasons not to make judgments. But there is more to it than that. Jesus makes it plain: "For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." If we are hasty in our judgments of others, others will be hasty in their judgments of us. There is an indication of the Golden Rule in here: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

There is MORE to what he says, of course. "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."

Can't you just see this picture? Somebody trying to get a little teeny speck out of a friend's eye while all the time trying to peer around a huge LOG in his own. But then Jesus always WAS good with pictures...one of the reasons why people liked him so much. It was a cute way of bringing the point home. But cute or not, the point was one with eternal validity. "Don't tell him HIS troubles; you've got troubles of your OWN."

I think of that story from the Old Testament, the 12th chapter of II Samuel. King David had just hit the absolute low point of his otherwise moral life - he had taken another man's wife for himself and then had the man killed. The prophet Nathan came to David with a little story; "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. [Then one day] a traveler came to the rich man but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him." If you recall, King David was incensed at anyone who would do such a thing. He told Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity." And do you remember what Nathan said to David? "YOU are the man!" What a perfect illustration of getting the log out of YOUR eye before trying to get the speck out of someone else's. I must remember that when I point the finger of judgment at someone else, the other three fingers folded back in secret in my own hand are pointing right back at me.

Clearly, we are to be most careful in condemning ANYONE if for no other reason than we are not perfect ourselves. As that little poem from childhood has it,

**There is so much good in the worst of us,
And so much bad in the best of us,
That it hardly behooves any of us
To talk about the rest of us.**

One more issue has to be dealt with here. Does this admonition about being judgmental mean that we have to ignore the evil that surrounds us? There is a French proverb that says "To understand all is to forgive all" to become the guiding principle of our life? I think not. And that is evident when we note what we read immediately afterward. "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you." What does Jesus mean here? Simply this: there are times when we ARE called upon to make judgments; but we need to be careful about them. We find the same thing just a few verses later when we read, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. For you will know them by their fruits." One could certainly not beware of false prophets without exercising a certain degree of sound judgment about them.

Sadly, one of the problems in today's church is that NO ONE feels compelled to exercise solid judgment. It takes the most egregiously awful behavior before anyone is willing to call a halt. Ask someone to LEAVE a church? Horrors! Not these days. But if you go back into the history of our Reformed tradition, you will find that the Protestant definition of the church is "that place in which the Word is preached, the Sacraments are administered, and discipline is exercised." DISCIPLINE? People are afraid. After all, "Judge not, that you be not judged."

Do you remember that situation that Paul addressed in the fifth chapter of I Corinthians? A certain man in the church was sleeping with his step-mother--- a practice even the heathens would think immoral. But the good church folk in

Corinth did not want to say anything; they did not want to judge. Paul had no problem - he was willing to judge by long-distance. "Throw the bum out," he said. "Don't you know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" There are times when judgments must be made.

There was an article in the "Chronicle of Higher Education" written by a creative writing professor at Pasadena City College. He says that one of this professor's favorite techniques in teaching is to use Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery." It is a tale of a small farming community that seems normal in every way; its people are hard-working and friendly. As the plot progresses, however, the reader learns this village carries out an annual lottery in which the loser is stoned to death. It is a shocking lesson about primitive rituals in a modern American setting. In the past, students had always understood "The Lottery" as a warning about the dangers of mindless conformity, but now they merely think that it is "Neat!" or "Cool!" Today, not one of the teacher's current students will go out on a limb and take a stand against human sacrifice. What is going on?

Think about that fellow who saw the man with all the umbrellas. I suspect that most of us would have THOUGHT the same thing (that some wrong had been done) and we would have probably DONE the same thing (nothing). But the message we get from our legal authorities is that keeping quiet, failing to report suspected wrongdoing, is simply BAD citizenship. Obviously, as the case with Mr. Jones and his umbrellas points out, some investigation should occur before accusations are made. But failure to make any judgment at all, including a judgment to go ahead and investigate, is nothing more than callous indifference. And if there is ANYTHING we should learn from Jesus' teaching it is that God's people can NOT be indifferent. We are called to a life of love, and no one who truly loves can ever be indifferent.

I will grant that making judgments can be a dangerous thing. That is precisely why Jesus went on in such detail about being careful in them. But he would never have wanted to be misunderstood to the degree that some have misunderstood him saying

that no one should make any kind of common sense judgments at all.

I offer this role model for you to learn from this lesson. Her name is Melanie Wilkes and you know her from Gone with the Wind. Two scenes involving Melanie are particularly significant. In the first, she, Scarlett O'Hara, and Mrs. Mead are leaving the Confederate hospital after a long day of nursing wounded soldiers. As they leave, a gaudily dressed, heavily made-up Belle Watling, the town prostitute, approaches them on the steps of the hospital. Scarlett tells Melanie not to talk with her. But Melanie receives her with complete kindness, and then graciously takes Belle's contribution for the hospital, which neither of the other women would stoop to accept.

The second scene is one of the dramatic high points of the movie. As you remember, all through the story, Scarlett has had eyes for Melanie's husband Ashley, and nursed secret dreams of running away with him. One day, Scarlett and Ashley are caught in mad embrace in the lumber shop. Word spreads through town like wildfire. Later that night, Melanie throws a surprise birthday party for Ashley. Rhett Butler demands that Scarlett go to the party as invited, so that Melanie can have the public satisfaction of throwing Scarlett out of her home. Scarlett arrives at the door dressed in a red gown, wearing plenty of rouge. Her eyes flash coldly like a cornered cat. The fiddler playing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" suddenly stops mid-phrase, and all the guests gasp. Eyes turn to Melanie - what will she do? But Melanie walks all the way across the room, greets Scarlett with open arms, and asks her to help receive the other guests. Then she takes her by the arm and escorts her through the gauntlet of people who had all judged her and wanted to see her thrown out.

Melanie Wilkes would never judge another person, even when it appeared she had every right and opportunity, even when her whole town would have cheered her if she had. When she died at the end of the movie, Rhett said simply, "She was the

only truly kind person I have ever known." What a wonderful epitaph!

With all that is going on today in our country, don't jump to judgment. Jesus says be careful. "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get."

Let us pray: O God our deliverer, you have led your people through the wilderness and brought us to the Promised Land. Guide us now through this wilderness of a Pandemic of viruses and hate. Guide and provide us each day with your word so that we may look forward to the glory of the world to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with us and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen