

Not Judging (Part One)

Do not judge

Reflection 26 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

O.K., interesting times we live in – and with all the attention these days on Washington, and things that are happening there, or may be happening there, or might happen there, it’s easy to miss that a lot of people are suffering: with jobs offshored or automated, with health care issues, with mass incarceration, with fears of deportation on the one hand and fears of terrorism on the other. And that’s just here in America which remains the richest country in the history of the world. Which it is! It’s easy to forget that. But our nation still is the richest country in the history of the world. So whatever its problems may be, they are not for want of resource.

Meanwhile the rest of the world’s doing worse. Places like Syria and Eritrea and Somalia and Libya and the South Sudan are lands of unremitting tragedy. And there are others. And so we are called to empathy, to empathizing with people who through no fault of their own have had their lives destroyed; to empathizing with people going through medical ordeals, their very lives hanging in the balance; to empathizing with people who are very different from us, who dress differently, or worship differently, or think differently, or vote differently, whose fears may not be ours but are still very real.

All this brings me back to the great need we have, the great need people everywhere have, to learn to live a life of love. Almost everything comes down to this. And the more I follow Jesus of Nazareth the more convinced I am that this is what he came to teach, and that this is what his Spirit alive and well across the earth is still teaching.

Consider, for instance, what Jesus taught in Matthew 7:1-5, “Do not judge.” I was not taught this when I was young. I was not taught this by the church I grew up in. In fact, I thought the church’s business was to judge. Almost every religious comment I heard was judgment. Everything was either right or wrong. Everybody was either right or wrong.

So “Do not judge.” What does that mean? And, in fact, we still live in an exceedingly judgmental society. For all the talk of tolerance, for all the alleged secularism and moral laxity in our society, public discourse in our nation is filled with moralizing, with judgment, with finger-pointing and blaming, with slander and contempt, with labeling and polarizing, with moral busybodies with a kind of fierce alienating certainty in their eyes. And I am sick to my soul of the incessant moralizing of immoral people. So “Do not judge.” What does that mean?

While society and certainly politics get meaner all the time, at least over the course of my lifetime, I am glad that at least the church of my youth has become kinder, and we – at least many of us – have learned over the years to not condemn others, to not write people off, to not suppose ourselves to be the gatekeepers or census takers for Heaven and Hell. We have learned Peter’s lesson as he contemplated what to do with a Roman centurion named Cornelius – that we are not to call any person impure or unclean (Acts 10:28). Some of us have even learned from a close reading of the Book of Acts that even those

who differ from us in their understanding and even their practice of Christian faith are still our brothers and sisters and are still disciples of Jesus.

Consequently, some of us, many of us, have learned to not look down on our brothers and sisters and even when we disagree with them to not walk off on them, to even appreciate the diversity knowing how much we all have to learn from one another. And we have learned that almost all judgment involves a credibility problem, some measure of hypocrisy. As Jesus notes in our text, drawing on his years in the carpentry shop, there we are with a plank in our eyes fixated on the speck of dust in our brother's eye. It's really kind of funny – some guy with a plank in his eye trying to extract this speck of dust from someone else's eye. How would you do that? And we've even learned that this may apply to matters far larger than specks of dust, that Jesus (and I draw here in John 7:53-8:11) when confronted one day in the temple courts with a woman caught in adultery unexpectedly took her side, exposed the hypocrisy of her accusers ("Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."), protected her, and though he clearly told her to go and leave her life of sin, he also made very clear that he did not condemn her.

And so we have learned all these things, and in our better moments we know that when we are inclined to judge someone we seldom have all the facts. We seldom see the whole picture. And the person we're tempted to condemn we might just applaud if we knew all they'd been through.

But were these the points that Jesus was making when he was teaching that crowd of Palestinian Jews that day 2000 years ago on that hillside in Galilee, and said, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you"? It's important to remember the historic moment: an occupied land seething under Roman oppression, with unrest and revolt in the air, a people aroused by militant Jewish nationalism. And on one level Jesus is saying in his Sermon on the Mount, "That's not the way!"

And in this context, with life and death on the line, he says: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the peacemakers. Don't retaliate. Love your enemies. Forgive those who wrong you. And now do not judge. The ways things seem to you may not be the way they really are. Remember even your oppressors – these Roman soldiers – have a basic humanity. They are sons, and fathers, and husbands, and brothers, and. They are filled with the same fears and hopes as you. And for goodness sake, don't forget that with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. And it was, a generation later when the legions of Rome crushed Jewish dissent.

But something even deeper is going on, and I do not mean to suggest that the Sermon on the Mount was a speech simply against Jewish terrorism, first-century style. Jesus, all the way through the Sermon on the Mount, is appealing to universal truths, drawing on the wisdom of the centuries, seeking to transform core human character where all the problems start in the first place. And he is telling us that at the end of human judgement disaster often lies.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week