

October 16, 2016



"DISCIPLE: Don't Judge"

Fall Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 7

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Our Fall sermon series continues this morning as we explore another aspect of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Remember, applied to Jesus, a disciple is someone who learns from him to live like him—someone who, through God's amazing grace, conforms his or her words and ways to the words and ways of Jesus.

Pope Francis writes this in his encyclical called *The Joy of the Gospel*: "It is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him; not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly; not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it...we know that with Jesus life becomes richer."

Indeed—with Jesus, life becomes richer, if sometimes more challenging and more complex. Many of you have spoken with me about how powerful last Sunday's Laity Sunday service was. As someone said, it was so moving and interesting to get a look inside into how other folks in the congregation are applying our faith in their own lives, how they live it out and what a difference it makes. It can be hard and demand a lot of us, even as it brings a life-giving measure of joy and love into our lives.

That brought to mind a cartoon I saw on the subject. It shows Jesus dressed as we usually picture him, in a long robe, sitting outdoors on a bench. His head is turned to a young man seated next to him. Jesus says to him: "No, I'm not talking about Twitter. I literally want you to follow me!"

Or, as Mira Pak put it last week, it's not enough to ask "what would Jesus do?" We must push ourselves to figure out what we are to do, and then do it.

Today's Scripture and theme really push us hard to examine how being a disciple changes us from the inside out. DISCIPLE—Don't Judge. We need to really think about why we are too often judging rather than loving others. How, by the grace of God, do we become those who live and act out of love for rather than judgment of others?

Isn't judging something of an occupational hazard for those of us who fancy ourselves among Christ's disciples? Aren't we prone to begin to think more of ourselves than we ought? Don't we sometimes take pride in our piety, our service, the hours we dedicate to doing the Lord's work? And if we begin—however unconsciously—to set ourselves above others, do we not risk the temptation to judge?

Today's focus on Judging calls us again to look deep within and examine our hearts. Judging is not the way of our Savior and Lord. "Blessed are the meek," Jesus said, the gentle, the humble. The old Aramaic roots of that word carry connotations of one who has softened that which is unnaturally hard within, one who has surrendered to God, letting go of moral heaviness within. Blessed are the meek, those in whom God's love has softened the hardness of the heart.

There's a story told about John Wesley that may or may not be true. It's certainly something that we could well imagine him saying. It seems that he learned that a certain British general, James Oglethorpe, had caught one of his servants stealing a bottle of his wine and had beaten him severely for it. The legend goes that Wesley confronted Oglethorpe and asked that the general find it in his heart to forgive his servant. "Sir," said the officer, "I never forgive." To which Wesley replied: "Then, sir, I hope you never offend."

As Wesley clearly knew, an exaggerated sense of one's own worth is a terrible and dangerous thing, for it's built on the premise of one's superiority over another. Individuals do it. Nations do it. In fact, we are so prone to thinking better of ourselves than we ought that we don't even realize that we're doing it until we feel so entitled to harbor these inflated notions about ourselves that our arrogance and pride is hidden from us and seems quite natural. Eventually the need that we have to find fault with another, to point out another's brokenness and sin, overshadows our need to confess our own.

But today's theme reminds us that to embrace our identity as Christ's disciples does not mean that we set ourselves over others, but should move us from judging to loving. As Henri Nouwen has written, "[being a disciple] does not mean excluding others, but includes them. Instead of rejecting others as less valuable, it accepts others in their own uniqueness.Once we deeply trust that we ourselves are precious in God's eyes, we are able to recognize the preciousness of others and their unique place in God's heart." In God's house are many dwelling places. There is room and welcome for all.

One of my most favorite contemporary articulators of faith is the writer, Anne Lamott. She's brutally honest about her own struggles with alcoholism and disarmingly clear about how God, through a little urban, multi-racial Presbyterian congregation in Northern California, saved her life and taught her about how to love herself and others.

In her book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, she describes how as a child she loved to work to get the tangles out of necklace chains. If you've ever done it, you'll know what she means. Great patience is required, working it and working it with a needle, working the knot until it lets go.

Anne goes on to describe a sermon her pastor gave about loving one's enemies. She wrote: "that day my pastor was speaking directly to me. She said that Christians [too often] speak in reverent terms of grace, justice, equality, mercy, and then we despise people who are also created in God's image, who are [God's] children, too..."

But then Lamott turns the same teaching back on herself and thinks about the people she most despises in this world, whose politics she can't stand, the people who make her crazy and she realizes this means that God loves them, too, and she needs to as well. Not agree with them, but love them.

She wrote: "I felt a shift inside, the conviction that love was having its way with me, softening me, changing my cold stone heart...Driving home I tried to hold on to what I'd heard that day: that loving your enemies was nonnegotiable. It meant trying to respect them, it meant identifying with their humanity and weakness...it had felt almost like ...a baby sense of hope, a chance of release from the constant knots in my stomach. I had poked a needle into another knot that day, tugged, let go, and finally felt some give...So tug tug, poke poke. I have to believe that if I do this, it will cause change—there will be more give, and give means there is more light between the links. You never know exactly where the knot is going to release, but usually, if you keep working with it, it will."

The spiritual work we all must do is this work of untangling the knots within us. Henri Nouwen put it this way, "in the heart of God, we can see that the other human beings who live on this earth with us are also God's sons and daughters...and [in the heart of God we can also see] our own belovedness...God says, 'give all your love to me, and I will give you both your neighbor and yourself.'"

How do we turn from being those who judge to those who love? How do we become truly welcoming, in our practice and in our heart of hearts? How do we untangle the knots of fear and prejudice and arrogance inside to let the love of God soften the hardness of our hearts?

Over the last weeks as we've explored what it means to be a beloved disciple of Jesus, we've looked to children to show us the way, for, as Jesus said, "it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs." Our youth get it, too, and live it out. I hear from our youth counselors, again and again, how inclusive and loving our youth are towards one another. Whatever cliques may exist at school don't get carried over into youth group. Whatever sense of the cool kids and everyone else doesn't happen here. They look out for one another. They listen to one another. They really love one another. What happens here every Sunday night at youth group and on every youth mission time is a little microcosm of what it means, as disciples of Jesus Christ, to live and act out of love for rather than judgment of others. Thanks be to God.

Why, then, do we too often judge when instead, God calls us to love and to bless? Because God isn't done with us yet. The grace of God is still working on us, working in us. The stories Jesus tells, like the one we hear today about the Pharisee and the tax collector, always take us from the "what is" of this world into the "what will be" of the world God intends. His teachings draw us away from judging and excluding, from setting ourselves above others, from seeing ourselves as better than others, more faithful than others, more blessed than others, into the all-inclusive love of the Kingdom of God. We grow from judging to loving.

So let's all keep working on loosening the knots within our own hearts that confine us to the ways of this world rather than the ways of Jesus. Besides—it's good for our bodies as well as our souls. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu has wisely noted: "Resentment and anger are bad for your blood pressure and your digestion."

Notes:

The DISCIPLE sermon series is drawn from the work of Martin Thielen in *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series*. Compiled by Jessica Miller Kelley. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

John Wesley story from Kolbell, Erik. *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.

Lamott, Anne. *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005.

Nouwen, Henri. *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992.

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