

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
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"The Nebulous Narrow Way of the Kingdom"
Sermon on the Mount, pt. 3
Matthew 7:1-23
February 24, 2019

Well, which is it Jesus?

Do not judge?

Or call out those people for the dogs and swine that they are?

I mean, it's kind of confusing, isn't it? He just said both.

Here we are in our 3rd and last week on Jesus' epic Sermon on the Mount... and he's really sending us mixed signals about how we relate to other people, isn't he?

I mean, there are some great one-liners in there, some that have become pretty famous.

"Do not judge, so that you might not be judged."

It's one that those outside the church always like to remind Christians, isn't it? And truth be told, we haven't always been very good at...

In fact, I was just having breakfast Friday with a gay man in his late 20s who grew up in the church and even thought about becoming a minister himself. He loved Jesus and loved the church. He just couldn't figure out how to not be gay.

And his church was real clear on how God felt about that. So, he tried to pray the gay away. He even went to Reparative Therapy camps and did everything the church told him to do so that God would make him straight... but none of it ever worked.

In fact, all it really did was heap shame upon shame.... "What was wrong with me?" And these days... he doesn't know what to make of his relationship with God.

He isn't sure whether or not he can call himself a Christian, but he wants to.

He certainly hasn't gone to church in a long time. He's, tried though. The problem is "it's kind of like PTSD," he told me. "Being there triggers all that shame."

He and I have been meeting on and off for several years now and this Friday he said quite flippantly, "I've been trying to decide which would be more helpful: going to therapy or going back to church where I can be judged by a whole bunch of people."

It's a common sentiment in his generation, you know. And not just in the LGBTQ community. For large portions of our culture, the church's reputation is more defined by being judgmental than being loving.

And it's not just a problem of more conservative churches, you know.

Christians on both the right and the left are often more concerned about being "correct" than being "loving."

Both Conservatives and Progressives -- we can get self-righteous in our convictions... and end up acting a lot more like the Pharisees in the New Testament than like Jesus...

It also happens in small ways, sometimes without even realizing it... we can get a little judgy...
about other people's choices...
other people's parenting styles...
other people's spending patterns...

Maybe we don't even realize it... It's just a look that comes across our face... or a subtle tone of voice... that reveals some deep hidden thing in our heart... and people know they are being judged.

So, this is one of those lines from Jesus that the world keeps asking us in the church to remember: **"Don't Judge... so that you're not judged."**

But then, with the very next breath, Jesus calls some people dogs and swine... which sounds kind of judgy, doesn't it? "Don't give what is good and holy over to the dogs. Don't throw your pearls before swine," he says.

And these mixed messages don't stop there. Pretty soon, he's on to one of his other famous one-liners. It's one of those Bible verses that still gets taught in schools... it's just not necessarily attributed to Jesus. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Brandt and Theo picked that one up in their Kindergarten class this year.

And for good reasons, right? We teach our kids: Be nice. Be kind. Be respectful... "Do unto others." And that's some good advice for us all.

But again, with the next breath Jesus says, "Beware of the wolves in sheep clothing." And I'd venture to guess that none of us want to be described as a wolf? Doesn't sound very nice or respectful, does it?

Not to mention Jesus goes right on to say that in the end... there are going to be some people that just won't make the cut: "Not everyone who says they are following me, are really part of my people. Sure, they may do some fancy stuff in my name... but when the end comes, I'm going to cast them out with the evil doers."

That doesn't sound like the Golden Rule to me, Jesus.

So, which is it?!

Are we going to cast some people out?

or are we going to follow the Golden Rule?

Are we going to call out the dogs and swine?

Or are we going to stop judging?

Which is it Jesus?!

Apparently, Jesus' answer is, "Yes."

It's both. In his deeply insightful way, Jesus is pushing us to ***navigate that really nebulous path between judging... and discernment.***

The two often get confused, you know.

Our so-called discerning can so easily become judging.

Or on the other hand, our insistence on not being judgmental...

can fool us into not being discerning.

Judging and discerning... are easily confused, but they are not the same.

And apparently life in the Kingdom of God requires we learn to navigate the two.

If we don't... or if we get them confused, there can be dire consequences...

consequences for our own spiritual lives,
for the church... the community of God's people,
and yes, profound consequences for the life of the world.

Are you judging?

Are you being discerning?

I have a friend who was a pastor at a church in North Carolina that had the two all mixed up... and she told me it was like a cancer in her congregation.¹ You see, one of the deacons at her church had had an affair with the previous pastor's wife, while that pastor was on a mission trip with some folks from the congregation, including the deacon's wife.

When the pastor came back, he found out and was heartbroken. But he and his wife wanted to work things out. They didn't want their kids to find out. So, they never told the deacon's wife. She remained in the dark.

Apparently, they didn't want more people to get hurt. They would keep it a secret.

Only a few people in the church ever knew...

The pastor even let the deacon stay in his role.

He was trying to practice grace... as best he could...

only that deacon was still a cancer.

Occasionally he was caught kissing widows in hidden corners of the church. He was even still flirting with the pastor's wife when no one was around. And that went on for two more years... as the spirit and life of the church began to slowly die... until finally the pastor left.

In comes my friend as the new pastor. Before too long she learned about this skeleton in the closet and she knew something needed to change. A few of the leaders agreed... but not everyone... And some were so adamant to keep that in the past. "Keep the secret" they told her. "That was a long time ago. Aren't you supposed to practice grace? Our last pastor did. Don't be judgmental", they told her.

And so, she struggled to pastor this congregation... with a cancer eating away at its life... because this congregation seemed to think that having surgery to remove a cancerous person would be too judgmental... too harsh... too unlike Jesus.

Instead, they kept throwing their pearls before the swine... giving the holy life of that church over to the dog.... and in the process, they lost a lot of leaders... and finally another really good pastor. My friend, she just couldn't stay in that toxic space.

What is discerning a wolf in sheep clothing to one person,

looks like being judgmental to another.

And when you're in the midst of it, it can be especially hard to tell,

¹ The details of this story have been altered to protect the persons and congregation involved.

even when you're trying your honest best.

And so, when we find ourselves in the midst of a mess like that,
we have to find the time and space to pull away from it all,
and ask: ***"Which is it Jesus?"***

Are we discerning or judging?

They seem so similar, but there is so much riding on the difference.

A lot of our brothers and sisters in the United Methodist Church are wrestling with that same dynamic this weekend here in St. Louis. Leaders of their denomination from all around the globe have gathered this weekend trying to work out the difference between the two.

You see, the United Methodists are a global denomination, that unlike Baptists, are governed by a single Book of Discipline...

Their Book of Discipline currently says that UMC pastors cannot perform same-sex marriages and that the UM bishops cannot ordain people who identify as part of the LGBTQ community.

And in their denomination, there are real consequences if you break the Book of Discipline. Not only can pastors lose their jobs, they can lose their homes, their ordination, and their entire retirement can be wiped out. All of it can be stripped away from them.

Breaking from the Book of Discipline in the UMC is no light thing.

And this global church, that itself the "United Methodist" is now finding itself quite divided on what the Book of Discipline allows and prohibits. So, for years now, its members have been trying to find a way to stay united even with their very diverse views on human sexuality.

And all of that is coming to a head here in St. Louis, this weekend.

There are those on the right that say any change in the Book of Discipline... and they will split the church. Because all those wanting to allow a more inclusive view... well, they are clearly false prophets, wolves in sheep's clothing.

And there are those on the left that adamantly say the current Book of Discipline is harmful, unjust, and unChrist-like. Those more conservative streams are awfully judgey. Those conservatives cry "Lord, Lord, we are prophesying in your name." but when the end comes, Jesus will say to them and their exclusive ways, "Depart from me you evil doers."

The more progressive churches insist.

It's a matter of justice. A matter of the gospel itself.

If things don't change, we have to leave.

All of these United Methodists from all over the world, from Africa and Asia, Europe and the Americas, are here in our city, right now, having this conversation...

And I imagine if we were there, we'd see strong emotions, and deep convictions, and holy crusades on both sides... with a whole lot of people saying, ***"Which is it Jesus?"***

Who is judging and who is discerning?

**Who can't see the plank in their own eye?
And who do we need to treat like we'd want to be treated?**

There is so much at stake for the UMC... as a whole denomination.
But even more, there's so much at stake for individual pastors and congregations.
And even more, there's so much at stake for LGBTQ individuals like my friend I had breakfast with this week,
and the message they will be told about God's love.
And so, we need to be praying for them...

But it's not just the Methodists that have been in the news lately, you know. Just two weeks ago, it was us Baptists.

And unlike the Methodists, we were in the news for the true sexual sin of our time—the real problem of sexual sin the church needs to be talking about: ***the epidemic of sexual violence.***

In case you didn't see it: The Houston Chronical reported over 700 victims of sexual abuse by Southern Baptist leaders in the last 20 years. They revealed 220 convicted abusers who were pastors of large churches and small churches, denomination leaders and Sunday school teachers.

220, and those were just the convicted leaders. Then there were all that have yet to be convicted... and all those Baptist preachers and leaders who told victims to keep it quiet... who tried to cover it up.

And these two news stories... the Baptist and Methodist... are a troubling pattern of the church in our time... a pattern the reveals a deep confusion between judging and discerning.

Think about all the time and energy the church has focused on condemning what 2 consensual adults are doing in their bedroom, while ignoring and silencing the sexual violence happening in our churches.

Discernment or judging. Which is it, Jesus?

Apparently, it's hard for us to tell.

Jesus said it would be. Right in the middle of all this back and forth, he says that finding our way between the two...is a ***very narrow way.***

"But wide is the gate, easy is the road that leads to destruction, and many take it."

It's a bit humbling, isn't it? How easy it is to walk that wide road... when we fail to be discerning and let the wolves take over...

Or how easy it is to walk that wide road when we slip into judging. It's like slipping off a narrow path with a steep drop on either side. It has dire consequences.

That must be why Jesus spends so much of the Sermon on the Mount helping us to navigate this narrow road.

**Do not judge. Take care of that log in your own eye.
Oh, but don't cast what is holy to the dogs.**

**Don't throw the gifts of God to the pigs.
Make sure to always treat others as you want to be treated,
but don't be fooled. Remember there are wolves in sheep clothing.**

This way and back that way... and back this way again... he pulls us here and there... trying to keep us on this narrow path... pushing us to navigate that nebulous line between judging... and discernment.

At one point, he tells us that you might only know by what kind of fruit is left. Is it good and nourishing fruit or rotten and deadly?

So maybe, when we find ourselves thrust onto the dangerous road between judgment and discernment... we need to stop and remember what the fruit of the Kingdom is like.

In the midst of trying to decide what the next step should be, ask yourself:

What tastes and smells like justice and mercy kissing?

What tastes and smells like God's dream of redemption and reconciliation?

What tastes and smells... like Jesus?

What looks like the Kingdom of God coming on earth as it is in heaven... where all is seen and known and made new?

Learning to recognize that will get us a long way down this narrow road...

And along the way we'll begin to realize that:

Judging smells a lot like shaming.

Whereas discernment smells like honoring someone's story.

Judging tastes like self-righteousness.

Discernment tastes like defending the dignity of those different than you.

Judgement looks like ignoring part of the truth for simple answers.

Discernment looks like holding the whole paradoxical truth together... and often finding a third way.

Sure, that's hard. I know it is.

But Jesus insists we keep trying.

Love demands it.

It is the only way,

down the ***Nebulous Narrow Way of the Kingdom.***

Amen.

Reflection

Thomas Merton:

"Our job is to Love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy."