

May 31

Scripture: John 3:1-17

Sermon: Not to Judge

One of the most beloved verses in the Bible is John 3:16. Most of us know it by heart: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." They are words of great comfort, especially at a time of loss. It is a reminder that those with faith have found eternal life. They are also words shared to remind us how much God loves us and the world.

As much as we love these words we often forget what comes next. That God sent Jesus not to judge but to save. Too often we put Jesus into the role of judge. And if not Jesus the church or individuals have taken on that task in the name of God! History is replete with examples of people or institutions taking on the judge's mantle. From inquisitions, to banishment or excommunication, to wars, the church through history has judged others' actions or beliefs and found them wanting and then punished the guilty parties or killed them. Our country was partially founded on the notion of religious tolerance. The Puritans came to New England to escape persecution for their beliefs. Did they learn anything from their experiences? No! They ended up being as intolerant of others who did not believe the way they did.

Even to this day we continue to have preachers and groups telling us that God has judged certain people or their actions and we, as the church, must then treat these people with less than loving kindness, to put it mildly. Throughout time we have embraced John 3:16 and its message of love and salvation for us and then have turned around and sinned in trying to become the judges for God. God did not even give that role to Jesus and yet we think it is ours!

So whenever you are in the mood to judge another for their opinions or their actions remember God loves that person as much as God loves you. One of the strengths of Mother Teresa was that she strived to never judge others, to just love them. Her quote, "If you judge people you have no time to love them" is still good advice. Now

I realize that this hard to do when others are proclaiming something that is so hurtful to you. But this word is clear. Our job is not to judge.

Now you might be thinking, “Is the preacher really proclaiming an anything goes kind of attitude? Is there no accountability? Jesus understood the nature of his coming and how it impacts the world. God sends the Son into the world in love in order to save the world, not condemn it. Yet the very presence of Jesus as incarnate Word in the world confronts the world with a decision, to believe or not to believe, and making that decision is the moment of judgment. The world has to decide whether to love or hate, to forgive or hold grudges, to give or to grasp. By the decisions they make they will be judging themselves and their actions. Later in this chapter in John we hear, “This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world and people loved the darkness more than the light.” We can and should remind people that their actions are not in alignment with Jesus’ teaching. What they do with that information is up to them. They might feel that we are judging them when we say something like this but as long as we are not judgmental it isn’t.

Let me give you an example. While I was in Bellingham a transitional housing program for those leaving prison was proposed for an apartment just a block from the church. Many in the neighborhood were immediately up in arms trying to get as many people as possible to sign a petition asking the city to refuse to give them an operating license. They were sure that having this “element” in their neighborhood would drive down property values and increase crime. I went to a meeting of the neighborhood that, ironically, was meeting at the church. The people wanting to bring in the transitional housing did a good job of explaining their program, the accountability and the security. Some, you could tell, were not listening. They were there to object no matter what. When I asked to talk to one of the real anti folk said, “We don’t need to hear from the church. They are just going to talk about love and forgiveness.” There was a decidedly quiet moment. I agreed that the church does try to look at people as individuals instead of labeling them, at second chances, and we welcome all, including those who disagree with us. Some laughed as they got the point of where they were sitting. Later I got some negative emails about my judgmental attitudes to those who didn’t agree with me. I had

not judged them but, by proclaiming what is core to our faith, they felt judged. The program did move forward and the group living there became good neighbors.

So what is our response to the world if it isn't to judge other's actions, or our own for that matter? Instead of judging we need to see how to love and through that love transform the world. Think about times in your life where others' actions have significantly impacted your own actions. I am guessing that those times you mentioned did not happen because you got a good dressing down. When someone tells us what we have done wrong and why it is wrong, we listen, we might think, they are right and even plan to change, but it doesn't affect real change within us. We alter our behaviors, maybe, just to not get yelled at again. Usually judgmental statements only cause us to become defensive. We quit listening and all it does is leave a bad taste in our mouths. No, when we are truly changed it is because we are recipients of unexpected love. We expect the person to respond with anger to our anger, to push back because we are pushing. To instead get a totally different response really causes us to pause. We think about our actions more clearly and often we don't like what we see. We begin to change because we want to model our actions after those we admire.

We see this all of the time in stories of paying it forward, where someone pays for the cup of coffee for the person behind them. These kinds of generosity-chains can go on for hours. Each person who receives generosity feels the need to pass it on. That is transformative love. This is why the message of Jesus is so powerful. Through his life, his willingly accepting death and forgiving those who were crucifying him, we gained a model for a different way of living and responding to the dark things of life. It has transformed generations. This is why his love was not to condemn but to save.

In my own experience I have seen this power often at work. A student fell asleep in class. He had a full schedule and was working almost 30 hours a week to try and pay his school bills. He was just a semester from graduating. He had gotten no help from his family. In fact he was the first one in his family to go to college. They laughed at him for spending all of this money for a sheet of paper. He was trying to use school loans as little as possible because he was afraid of debt. That was why he was working so hard and for the past couple of months had been sleeping in his car, showering at the school

gym to save even more. When he was awakened by the professor he figured he would be dismissed from the class, one he needed for his degree. The professor told him to come see him at his office that day. The student, feeling that his years of study were falling away, because there was no way he could stay in school another semester for just one class. It was too expensive. So he approached the meeting with dread. The professor asked him what was going on in his life. He had been a good student but recently his work was less than expected. He finally shared all that was happening. The professor smiled and said, "I have a spare room in my house. It's yours, rent free for the semester under one condition, you cut back on your work and focus on your studies." It was unimaginable grace. He had grown up in a family that lived a dog eat dog mentality. He all of a sudden realized there were really good people in the world. He took the professor up on his offer. He ended up staying with him for several more years as he got his own doctorate. He went on to teach and bought a big old rambling house which always had a few hard-up students living there. His mind had been on getting to college, getting a degree and making lots of money. It changed to how to make the world a better place for others in his work and life.

But this doesn't mean that we let people totally off the hook. We need to remember and hold people accountable when their actions stray from their words. We have to let people know that what they are doing isn't loving or caring. We do it not in judgment but because we want the best for them. Often the best way to remind others how to live is by openly displaying those same values we want for them in our own lives. It is, as I said, a way that others judge themselves for they see their actions in the light of others behavior. It forces them to evaluate and hopefully change.

God has reserved the title of judge. We are given the task to love, to forgive, to remind. When we keep those things in balance we find the transformative power of God that really does change the world.