

A friend tells of a time recently when her five-year old daughter, sitting at the dinner table, looks us and said, “Mama, she’s going to hell.” My friend shared how jarring her daughter’s words were- like fingernails going down a chalkboard. “Where did she learn this?”, my friend asked herself and the her daughter. Her boisterous daughter quickly became silent and refused to reveal who had told her this info that she was repeating (not fully understanding her words or condemnation). Another friend and colleague shares being around the dinner table with family over the holidays last year and after a family friend’s name and her impending divorce was mentioned, her sister-in-law, without skipping a beat, said, “Such a shame. She is definitely going to hell.” Friends, who are we to say who is condemned to hell and who isn’t? What right do we have to boldly make this condemnation? Let’s see what Jesus has to say about that in a section of the last part of the Sermon on the Mount. But before we read today’s scripture...let us first pray. **PRAY. READ Matthew 7:1-6, 12.**

Out of the gate, let me say that most scholars agree that “the common translation of Matthew 7:1, ‘Do not judge’ is neither accurate nor helpful. As everyone knows we make judgments everyday despite the disclaimers, ‘it’s not for me to judge’ or ‘to each their own’ or ‘whatever floats your boat.’ We would be in deep trouble and frequent danger if we did not make discernments about people, situations, and actions. In the face of daily experience, the translation ‘Do not judge’ suggests the Sermon offers an impossible ethic or rule of life” (Warren Carter, workingpreacher.org). Many scholars offer another suggestion for the translation. “Instead of ‘do

not judge' think about it as 'do not be judgmental, fault-finding, hypercritical.' Therefore, 'do not judge' means you do not put yourself in the role of God: it does mean: do not presume to know what's in someone's heart" (AJ Levine, *Sermon on the Mount*). What Matthew is referring to here is condemning someone to hell. Therefore the translation is more "Do not condemn (to hell)," or "Do not play God" would also be appropriate. "This translation addresses various situations involving other people: conflict, fear of outsiders, intolerance of difference, prejudice, disdain, anger, etc. In such situations, people can write others off as beyond redemption, outside God's grace, and consign them to hell. The command forbids the arrogance of denying mercy, even dignity, to another. Followers of Jesus have no right to declare someone is beyond God's mercy" (Carter).

Bono, the front man for the band, U2, has written a new book entitled, *Surrender: 40 Songs, 1 Story*. In it, Bono writes a story that fellow musician and actor, Harry Belafonte, who has been fighting for injustice his entire life, shared with him. It is a story that made a huge impact on Bono's life. Belafonte was good friends with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and he marched with him a good bit in the Civil Rights Movement. Belafonte recalls one of the most heated debates in the Movement. "When Jack Kennedy appointed Bobby to attorney general in '61, everyone in the room was sounding off about Bobby Kennedy. How he lacked the inspiration of his brother John, the president and many other condemnations. As the conversation grew more heated, Harry recalled how he turned to Martin Luther King, who he could tell was growing tired of the criticizing of Bobby Kennedy. "Martin slams his hand on the table to snap everyone out of it.

Does anyone here have anything positive to say about our new attorney general?" "No, Martin, that's what we're telling you" comes the reply. "There's nothing good about this man; he's an Irish redneck; got no time for the Black man's struggle." King, said Harry, had heard enough and adjourned the meeting. But before he dismissed them, he said, "Gentlemen, I am releasing you into the world to find one positive thing to say about Bobby Kennedy." "Years later," Harry continues, "when Bobby Kennedy lay dying on the kitchen floor of a Los Angeles hotel, he'd become a civil rights hero. A leader, not a laggard, in our movement, and I ask myself to this day if we got him wrong in those early days. I'll never know but I still grieve his loss" (pp. 392-393). That's the thing about judgment, many times we're wrong.

Jesus tells the disciples that the criteria we use to judge others will be used to judge us, and I don't know about you but that is the last thing I want. How about you? To deprive others of mercy means to deprive oneself of it as well. I want to be clear here. As I said above it is impossible not to judge, and sometimes we need to judge. One scholar puts it this way, "Jesus is not saying that we should become bystanders or that we should not seek justice. We are not to think, when seeing a wrong being committed, *It's not my job to judge, so I'm just going to let it happen*. To the contrary: we don't park out ability to discern the good from the bad at the baptismal font. Discernment is essential. 'Do not judge,' does not mean giving up one's responsibility for preventing harm" (AJ Levine, *Sermon on the Mount*). Therefore, how does one judge wisely by avoid judgmentalism? When working as a chaplain in a women's prison in Atlanta, I remember hearing

and experiencing and believing that the women's crimes were not the sum total of who they were. After all, would any of us want to be judged by, or even known by, the worst thing you've ever done in your life? "When it comes to judging, especially in terms of a person's morality or the total of their deeds, that is not our call" (Levine). That is God's call and last time I checked, none of us are God. A word to the wise: Everyday we do theology. Everyday we speak about God. Therefore, be careful what you say when you don't really know. We can do a lot more damage than good.

Rather than judging others for the purpose of condemnation, we are better off attending to our own blind spots. My grandmother used to say when you say something bad about someone else, you're pointing one finger at them and your three remaining fingers are pointing back at YOURSELF. Correction of the other begins with and follows self-correction. 9 times out of 10 what is bugging you about a person is the same thing that is inside of you. Only when you take the time to examine yourself will you begin to see more clearly. Jesus asks why we worry about a speck in our neighbor's eye when we haven't looked at the log in our own eye. He then answers his own question. "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" (vv. 3-5). Removing the speck from another's eye IS possible BUT only after we've done work on ourselves. "The eye cannot be the lamp of the body if it's got specks in it; the disciple cannot be the light of the world if that disciple is too busy judging the world rather than helping to heal its brokenness" (Levine).

And what's this strange verse about holy and dogs and pearls and swine? The term "holy" refers to what is set apart for the divine and dogs were widely used in biblical times to express hostility and contempt for others. Dogs were thought of as not being able to receive correction. The swine and the pearls repeats the same point. Pearls are something of value; whereas swine are despised. One scholar puts it this way: "These images express that there is no point offering valuable correction when it will be despised and rejected. But even in such circumstances, the rejected one is not permitted to consign them to hell" (Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*). I was recently reminded of a story of two of my favorite theologians, Catholic Priest Henri Nouwen and Presbyterian minister Mr. Fred Rogers (as in Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood). These two were dear friends and wrote and called one another regularly. On the occasion of some heavy criticism of Mr. Rogers in an article, Fred mailed the article to Henri and Henri wrote back to Fred. "I read the article you sent me and can very well understand how much that must have hurt you. It must be really painful to be confronted with a total misunderstanding of your mission and your spiritual intentions. It is these little persecutions within the church that hurt the most. I simply hope that you are not too surprised by them. They come and will keep coming precisely when you do something significant for the Kingdom." Henri went on to say something similar to that of not giving what is holy to the dogs nor throwing your pearls before swine who will maul you. He wrote, "I don't think it makes much sense to argue with the writer of this article. He speaks from a very different plane and will not be open to your explanations. Let us pray for each other, that we remain

faithful and not become bitter and that we continue to return to the center where we can find the joy and peace that is not of this world.”

In his letter to Fred, Henri is also modeling what Jesus says next in what is known as “The Golden Rule,” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” But then Jesus adds one other phrase: “For this is the law and the prophets.” Here Jesus is offering one summary of all of scripture. The other one comes later in Matthew and Mark’s Gospels with the question “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” To which Jesus replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, AND you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He then concludes, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” In other words the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and the prophets back up these commandments. These summaries Jesus gives are a guide through which the rest of Jesus’ teachings should be filtered. Hey, no one said discipleship was easy; however, it is doable and Christ calls us to follow him.

So how can we practice not being judgmental? Here are five practices. **One: Turn to wonder.** Parker Palmer, an educator and a Quaker, speaks of a phrase to say in your mind when you find yourself beginning to make a judgement or feel critical or be unkind to your neighbor. **He invites people to “turn to wonder.”** I **wonder** what brought her to this belief or opinion? I **wonder** what he’s feeling right now? I **wonder** what my reaction can teach me about myself? Simply notice when you’re feeling judgmental, name the judgment and turn to wonder. By noticing and naming our judgments, we slowly make a shift from judgment to wonder- thus, making

space for mercy. The **second suggestion** is to, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. suggested, **find one positive thing to say about that person**. It sounds so simple and yet can be very difficult when we're in the midst of being judgmental. **Third is to pray**. Pray for those for whom you hold judgment and for yourself to remain faithful and not to become judgmental or bitter. The **fourth suggestion** is also a mindful practice. Ask yourself quietly or out loud if you're being less discriminate about how you're judging and more indiscriminate about how you're loving. In other words, **are you spending more energy loving than you are judging?** Even if you're thinking it or saying it quietly, it's already in your heart. As the song says that Charles will sing in a moment, "Always love, hate will get you every time." And last but not least...**#5- Live the Golden Rule and the Greatest Commandment**. Or maybe the Golden Rule with a slight amendment that Episcopal priest and professor, Barbara Brown Taylor and her partner, Ed, use: "Do unto others as *they* would have you do unto *them* (instead of thinking they are just like you)" (*Holy Envy*). Friends, our words and actions are a powerful witness to our faith in Jesus Christ and what it looks like to follow him. How are we willing to make space for mercy in our own lives and in the lives of our neighbors? Brothers and Sisters, sometimes faith looks a lot like coming to Christ's table in the midst of our hypocrisy, hypercriticism, and just plain ole sinfulness. It looks like showing up- undeserving-having shown judgement- and yet, participating, not knowing what God is going to do with us but trusting that with God, in Christ, mercy triumphs over judgment. Thanks be to God! Amen.