

Psalm 103:8-13

Matthew 7:1-7

Romans 14:1-12

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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Be Curious, Not Judgmental

I recently saw a short video with a clip from Kid President, a child who gives insights to adults from a child's perspective on YouTube, and in the clip I saw he was advising adults with these words of wisdom, "Before you say something about the BBQ sauce on someone else's shirt, take a look at the BBQ sauce on your own shirt."

☺ I had to share that because it sounded oddly similar to today's gospel reading from Matthew 7 that Bob read for us: "Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use it, it will be measured to you." I looked up the Message biblical translation of the same verse, and it drove the point home: "Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults-unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging." And just for good measure, in the sage words of the prophet Bob Marley, "Who are you to judge the life I live? I know I'm not perfect and I don't live to be. Before you start pointing fingers ... make sure your hands are clean."

Now in light of that in-your-face introduction and the scripture readings today, and lest you think that this is a sermon where the pastor is calling you out, can I make a confession? I judge people all the time. I judge people for what they wear, I judge people and the words that come out of their mouth, I judge people for how they spend their money, and I definitely judge people for how they drive. I've judged other Christians and non-Christians, I've judged other pastors, family members, and my goodness, I judge people for judging people! You know I've judged some of you too... ☺ I know for a fact that you judge me too. It comes with the territory of being a minister.

We all know this is not the best quality about us but we all are to some degree, judging, judgmental, judg-ful judgers! So when Jesus says, "in the same way you judge others, you will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" and when Paul writes to Romans, "Who are you to pass judgment on one another?" for a bunch of judging judgers (point to self), this is NOT the good news for us today. And I'm not even going into how we *behave* when we are judging others! Because we tend to feel self-righteous and superior when we judge.

So now, up front and right away, I'm putting it all on the table. We know that we all do it. We are all judging judgers/others. You, me, all of us. Why does this matter for us at the church?

In 2012 there was a book called "UnChristian" by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons that was published based on an extensive study of non-Church going young adults ages 16-29 conducted by the Barna Research Group. The book reveals that nearly 9 out of 10 young adults believe that the Church is too judgmental. *Less than half* of those surveyed, including church-goers, believe that the church loves unconditionally. Or put another way, more than half of those surveyed including church goers, believe the church loves with conditions placed upon them. This was based on a study over a decade ago.

Now if you've been coming to Stone Church for a while, I hope you know that the gospel of Jesus that is preached here is that in spite of our flaws, failures and any kind of shortcomings we have, that God in Christ loves us-that Christ died and was risen so that we might have abundant life-and we are thus called to live that love with service and justice for all people to experience the same grace and love and mercy. Unfortunately there are still too many Christian churches that preach that God loves you ... but you have to stop being a sinner. You have to behave in a certain way. They get to make the rules instead of following the example of Jesus. And so the judgment continues.

Before we start edging into that self-righteous superior place about how open and welcoming our faith and our church is, there was another study done across U.S. churches and **all** of them would identify themselves as welcoming and loving.

In our passage from Romans, Paul is addressing a community that is seeking to integrate across big differences. Verse 2: "Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables." In our current context, overcoming the big differences written here, like meat eaters and vegetarians, do not feel like a big deal. Can you imagine that splitting our community? Why are they fighting over this and judging each other about it? But for the context of this new faith community where eating practices were always religiously oriented and how folks connected with their faith, it was a big deal, and they were judging each other and quarreling over it. If I were to put it into a modern example, all I have to say is "Drums and praise music in worship every Sunday!" and whatever that evokes for you is what this community was experiencing. Music and worship style is probably the contemporary version of meat eaters versus vegetarians. People have strong feelings about it, would likely quarrel about it, and I know someone in this room as you walk out today will say to me, "Funny example, Irene, but we better not ever do that." ☺ It's a good modern

example because some folks really do connect with their faith through “praise music” just as some connect with their faith through traditional hymns.

And so Paul asks, who are you to pass judgment? And his ask to the faith community in disagreement is not choosing sides and saying one is better than the other, but instead reminding them that all should be done to glorify God. Because when we judge one another, what it does more than anything else is it *distances* us from one another. Judging is so easy. We can judge each other without knowing one another’s history, story, background or pain. We can judge easily without having to do the harder work of self-examination. We can judge while standing at a distance, without any effort or intention to actually get to know one another or help one another. We make our own assumptions based on what we think we know or understand without having to do the harder work of asking why.

Okay, so we get the point, I think. We are being called out by Jesus and Paul in today’s lectionary readings to not pass judgment, to welcome, and to do some self-work if we are doing that. But as I’ve emphasized about myself and us all, we are all judgy judges. How do we stop it? Friends, if judging each other increases the distance between us and from building community, then what’s the alternative?

Well, our good friend Ted Lasso along with words from Walt Whitman might have something to teach us about that. If you heard my sermon from last week, you know that in my attempt to get you all aboard the Ted Lasso train, I used an example from that show and I am doing it again today. Just a quick recap if you weren’t here and have no idea what or who I’m talking about, Ted Lasso is a show about a likeable American coach who has been recruited to England to coach soccer even though he has no experience with the sport whatsoever. And again, throughout the show, Ted is ridiculed for his folksy optimism and inexperience but slowly wins people over with his hopeful, kind and compassionate approach to coaching and life.

So there’s a scene toward the end of the first season where Ted is in a pub with his boss, Rebecca, the owner of the soccer league, and her ex-husband, Rupert, whose character is basically a bully and who tries to get under her skin all the time. And without too many details, Ted and Rupert end up placing a bet over a game of darts. The details of the bet are not important here, but the lesson that Ted weaves into his final throws of the game are.

Rupert views the game of darts as an easy way to get what he wants and judges Ted right away assuming he won’t be any good at the game. In Ted’s final turn, in which he needs throws that are almost impossible, he gives this speech:

He says, “Guys have underestimated me my entire life and for years I never understood why – it used to really bother me. Then one day I was driving my little boy to school, and I saw a quote by Walt Whitman, it was painted on the wall there and it said, ‘Be curious, not judgmental.’ I like that.” (Ted throws a dart.) “So, I get back in my car and I’m driving to work and all of a sudden it hits me – all them fellas that used to belittle me, not a single one of them was curious. You know, they thought they had everything all figured out, so they judged everything, and they judged everyone.” (and Ted keeps hitting what he needs to hit to ultimately win) And he continues, “I realized that their underestimating me – who I was had nothing to do with it. Because if they were curious, they would’ve asked questions. Questions like, ‘Have you played a lot of darts, Ted?’ To which I would have answered, ‘Yes sir. Every Sunday afternoon at a sports bar with my father from age ten until I was 16 when he passed away.’ Barbecue sauce.” And then Ted throws a bullseye to win the game.

Be curious, not judgmental.

And so there’s the alternative, friends. Because open ended questions and curiosity about one another, especially across differences or perceived differences, draws us closer to each other, builds relationships, creates understanding, and grows compassion. In life, being curious allows you to get to know someone for who they really are while being judgmental holds you back from making real connections.

If we want to be a truly welcoming and affirming church, if we want to do the hard work of anti-racism and building a diverse community, we need to be more curious about people and situations and reasons why the differences are there, rather than being judgmental.

Because we cannot forget that the opposite of judgement is not acceptance. Let me repeat that. The opposite of judgment is not acceptance. The opposite of judgement is self-examination. Before I judge someone else’s shortcomings, I need to take a good hard look at my own. To look at the log in my own eye. And when I catch myself judging and distancing myself from someone, this advice rings true: Be curious, not judgmental.

Friends, Jesus was judged too. He was constantly being judged by those religious leaders trying to keep things decently and in order for breaking rules like healing on the Sabbath. Associating with sinners like tax collectors and prostitutes. For being from Nazareth, because you know, nothing good comes from Nazareth. Touching and healing the untouchable. Forgiving sins. What might have changed if they had been curious and asked Jesus why he did what he did. In the community Paul was addressing, what if they asked why their diet was different instead of placing value

on it immediately? What if we asked folks who worship differently why that's meaningful to them and what if they asked that of us?

In the end, we are only accountable to our God.

And so Church, next time you catch yourself placing judgment and that judgment creates distance between you and your neighbor, I challenge you to be curious. Do some self reflection and self examination as well. Why does what you see evoke that judgment for you? What could be different if you choose a posture of curiosity?

Friends, by doing so, I pray that the barbeque sauce on your shirt come off quickly and easily so that we can understand how the barbeque sauce got on someone else's shirt and we can all do the work of compassion, healing, cleaning and service together. Be curious, not judgmental.

Amen.