

A JUDGMENT CALL

A Sermon by Thomas R. Henry

St. Pauls United Church of Christ, Chicago

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Text: Matthew 6:9-15; 7:1-12 (included at end of sermon)

I was parallel parking my car on Clark Street and wondering how many minutes worth of quarters I had to feed into the box with the buttons and slots. A really big SUV was ahead of me and it began to pull out as I was pulling in. Suddenly it stopped and sat there for what seemed like 20 minutes but was more like 6 seconds. It was blocking me from maneuvering into the parking space and I could feel my blood pressure rising. After those interminable 6 seconds, a woman jumped out of the SUV and began walking toward me. "Oh, great!" I thought. Although my actual thinking words were less acceptable. "What does she want?!" Well, she came right up to the driver's side window of my car and stood there. Knowing how I seem to attract strange people on buses and trains, I was not sure whether or not to put down the window. But I did.

And as soon as I did, she said, "Hi." And handed me one of those little white parking tickets that we who drive in Chicago have all come to know and love. As she handed it to me she said, "This has 40 minutes left on it and I thought you could use them." Somewhat dumbfounded, I said, "Thank you!" And I took the ticket. As she turned to go back to her car, she said, "Now go and do unto others."

"Do unto others," I repeated silently, and then finished the quote from the mouth of Jesus, "as you would have others do unto you."

As I waited for the woman to pull away, the whole Sermon on the Mount began to tumble around in my brain. Especially those words, "For with the judgment you make, you will be judged, and the measure you give, will be the measure you get."

How quick I was to let my blood pressure go to 200 over 120. How quick I was to judge this woman and her actions. How quick.

How quick I am to judge others at a distance, knowing nothing about what is going on in their lives. Or even in their minds at that moment. How quick I am to make a judgment call. In effect, damning someone to hell because I have been inconvenienced.

In many different ways, in many different words, Jesus made reference to our desire to judge others as we would NOT want others to judge us. In fact, there are hundreds of references to judgment in the Bible, and most of them concern the human proclivity for finding the speck that is in our neighbor's eye, while walking around with a log in our own eyes. Those biblical judgment references go way back beyond Jesus, back into the Hebrew scriptures, too. In the book of Ezekiel, God speaks to the people saying, "...according to their own judgments, I will judge them." (Ezekiel 7:27) God will judge me in the way I judge others and with the same judgments I make about others. To be quite honest, that kind of scares me to death.

But it is more than you or I who are judged as individuals. God judges nations as well. And God judges the judgments of nations. That is really what Ezekiel was writing about. The judgment of the nation. “According to their own judgments, I will judge them.” That has great implications for policy setting and lawmaking. On almost every issue from immigration and health care, to abortion and right to life; to same sex marriage, to decisions concerning the end of life. According to our own judgments, God will judge us. According to the judgments of our nation, our nation will be judged by God.

This implies that we make judgments. We do. And we will. For as long as we live. If there were not judgments made, there would be chaos in society; there would be even more violence in the world. There would be no Law and Order (on multiple channels and almost every night of the week.) We will judge others. We must judge ourselves. And, in fact, Jesus makes it clear that judgment calls will be made when he talks about the specks and logs. He says, “First take that big old log out of your own eye. It’s blocking your vision and blinding you. Then, then, you can see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.”

Jesus acknowledges that there are specks in our neighbors’ eyes. There are no sinless, blameless people in this world. He also recognizes that we will see the specks in our neighbors’ eyes. And that we will try to take out those specks. It’s only human to do that, and maybe it is even what God intended. But, Jesus says, we had better work on getting the log out before we do.

Getting the log out is what we do when we pray a prayer of confession. Here in worship or home alone. Getting the log out is what happens when we let ourselves listen to the reading of scripture and not assume it is being read to someone else. Getting the log out is what happens when we listen to all sides of issues. Not just to a Rush Limbaugh or Ann Coulter on one side. Not just to Keith Olberman or Rachel Maddow on the other. Not just to what allows us to judge others, but shields us from judging ourselves. Seeing the specks. Being blinded by the logs.

Before he retired and moved away, James Gustafson was a member of this church. Jim was senior professor of ethics and theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School. (He used to drive me crazy while I was preaching because he always sat forward in the pew with his head in his hands. I wasn’t sure if he was doing that to really absorb what I was saying or if he was thinking, “What an idiot!”) Right in the middle of the annual meeting of this congregation one year, as a major decision concerning the mission of this church was being debated, Gustafson stood up and said, “The human sin is the contraction of the soul, the narrowing of vision.” We all had to stop and think about what we were doing and why.

Being a community of faith means being a place and a gathering of people where our souls are enlarged and our visions are expanded. That is what we try do here. We expand visions. We get the log out. We enlarge souls. We do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Getting the log out of our eyes can be quite painful, but doing so lets us see. It lets us see what God wants us to see. It lets us see others as we see ourselves. It makes love possible. And that is good for others and that is good for us. Research and studies have shown over and over again that compassionate, caring people are emotionally happier people.

The measure you give will be the measure you get. This teaching in Matthew is preceded in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount by what have come to be called the Beatitudes. Blessed are the meek, the poor and poor in spirit; blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are all of these for they are people who have had their hearts are enlarged, their souls enlarged.

Also among the many teachings of Jesus that Matthew gathered together as the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord's Prayer. The prayer he taught his disciples to pray. A prayer that includes some words which are the flipside of the judgment call. Jesus said, "When you pray, say..."forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Oh, God, forgive us in the same way as we forgive others. Forgive us our debts. Forgive us our trespasses. Forgive us our sins. Forgive us for letting our souls be contracted. Forgive us for letting our spirits be shriveled up with meanness and prejudice and shortsightedness and fear. Help us to live as forgiven and forgiving people.

Now once again I want to say that we will never be judgment free. Nor should we be. Judgments must be made if there is to be order in society and justice in the world. Jesus made judgments. We will make judgements. Churches and nations will make judgment calls. And must. For it is not only your or I, but our neighbors as well, who may have logs in their eyes. Not just specks, but logs. And we have responsibility to help them remove those logs. But first, we have to be aware of how we are seeing the world through the logs in our own eyes. How we are blinded by what we believe to be the only way, the right way, my way. And most of all we have to always include as part of our judgments some recognition of those words of Ezekiel, that according to our own judgments God will judge us. And those words of Jesus, that with the judgment we make we will be judged.

This sermon may sound kind of negative, and even judgmental in itself. But it is meant to be neither. It is an attempt to perform some opening up the heart surgery. And a little eye surgery as well...to get the log out.

George Washington Carver could have been reading the Sermon on the Mount when he wrote: "How far you go (in life) depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, tolerant of the weak and tolerant of the strong, because someday in life you will have been all of these."

I held onto that little white parking ticket that day for a moment or two. Looking at those 40 minutes that had been given to me as a gift. That woman had no way of knowing, but it really was a gift of grace. I got the log out. My vision improved. My soul got a little bigger. My heart was enlarged. And I smiled. And I felt good.

But then the guy behind me banged into my bumper and jolted me into judgment again. Oh God, forgive him for he knew not what he did.

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SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION AND READINGS

Today's scripture readings are from what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount. These are teachings of Jesus, collected and grouped together by the Gospel writers, and containing words of wisdom for people then and for us now. Included in today's reading is one version of the Lord's Prayer, as well as teachings on judgment, forgiveness, faith, and ways of showing with our lives how Christians live.

We begin with the Lord's Prayer from the Gospel according to Matthew:

And Jesus said: pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from evil.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye? 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.

Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

(Reference: Matthew 6:9-15; 7: 1-12)