

Lessons Along the Way: Knowing Our Place

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 7:1-12
on March 12, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

I.

*From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.
The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.
But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.*

II.

Jesus continues with his encouragement away from what distracts us from God's kingdom here on earth and toward that which brings life. We remember those distractions: "do not pray and fast and give alms so that everyone else will admire you, do not store up treasures on earth, do not worry," to which we add today: "do not judge."

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged, Jesus says. Deal with the plank in your own eye before focusing on the speck in another's. Don't throw what's holy to the dogs. But as you pray to God, do be bold!: ask, seek, knock. And do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

There's so much good here today, but I want us to sit a bit with these first few verses about judgment.

Do not judge, Jesus says. So how do we judge? Oh the list is varied alright. We judge based on standards we set for ourselves, or on priorities we

maintain, or on the ways we perceive right and wrong, or from expectations we carry (expectations so often unstated or unacknowledged). We judge ourselves with the exacting stare of perfection or self-preservation. We judge the past based on the standards of the present, looking with clear eyes back into times and spaces where our ancestors “saw through a glass dimly.” From the most significant (slavery and the subjugation of racial minorities, women, LGBTQ citizens, those who are differently abled), to the most practical (how people could have lived without indoor plumbing or Chick-fil-A or iPhones!), to the most relational (your dad’s emotional availability, your mom’s perspective on marriage and child-rearing), we almost can’t help but to judge when looking back. Yet we’d be wise to expect the same as our descendants look back upon us, judging perhaps the way we live, what we eat, how we work, who we’ve become. We judge ourselves, too often awash in self-criticism and shame. Judgment, it seems, comes as naturally to us as anything.

So when Jesus says, “do not judge,” are there any nuances we should understand? Perhaps another way to understand what he’s saying is to hear “do not judge” to mean “do not be judgmental, or hypercritical, or hunting for faults.” As scholar Amy-Jill Levine reminds us, “‘do not judge’ means do not put yourself in the role of God; it means: do not presume to know what’s in someone’s heart.”¹ Even better, Jesus suggests, is to deal with your own issues first. Attend to your own blind spots. Deal with the plank that’s in your own eye before you point out the speck in another’s. And once you’ve done that, approach each other gently instead of from the right and hard place. Start instead with your “doubts and loves,” as Yehuda Amichai names, for I bet

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*, p106.

there's far more overlap across the political or theological spectrum when talking about our doubts and loves than when talking about our strategies or plans, and far more compassion when we remember each other's humanity too.²

III.

It was Anthony de Mello who offered a rather practical, if hard solution. "Every time you find yourself irritated or angry with someone," he said, "the one to look at is not that person but yourself. The question to ask is not, 'what's wrong with this person,' but 'what does this irritation tell me about myself?'" "Do this right now," he directs his reader. "Think of some irritating person you know and say this painful but liberating sentence to yourself: 'the cause of my irritation is not in this person but in me.'

"Having said that," de Mello continues, "begin the task of finding out how you are causing the irritation. First look into the very real possibility that the reason why this person's defects or so-called defects annoy you is that you have them yourself. But you have repressed them and so are projecting them unconsciously into the other. This is almost always true but hardly anyone recognizes it. So search for this person's defects in your own heart and in your unconscious mind, and your annoyance will turn to gratitude that his or her behavior has led you to self-discovery..."³

(Pretty positive that Anthony de Mello is holier than I am!)

Man alive, do we ever find any way possible NOT to do this, right? Can you imagine if our elected leaders got on cable news and instead of bashing each other, revealed a new self-awareness that their political opposite helped

² Thanks to Parker Palmer's reflection on this poem for the imagination to examine the "doubts and loves." You can read it here: <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-place-where-we-are-right/>

³ Excerpt from Anthony de Mello, *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together*, p282.

them to see? Can you imagine if Elon Musk tweeted a new self-discovery instead of a new burn on someone each day, or if Kim Kardashian shared about her newfound peace from the throngs who comment on her posts each day? Can you imagine discovering your own plank when thinking of the Elon Musks or Kim Kardashians, or the politicians or the pundits, or the girl at work who drives you crazy or the neighbor down the street who you just can't stand? What if the beliefs or attitudes or expectations or opinions or judgments to which you've clung so tightly are the very things now hardening the ground of your heart? What might pruning and plowing do for you, for your life, and for the world? Do you have the courage to find out?

IV.

"I preached about a gun rights advocate. He wasn't who I thought." That was the headline in the USA Today op-ed back in 2017 when Dr. Amy Butler, then-Senior Pastor of The Riverside Church, one of our country's most deeply influential churches particularly in the 20th century, wrote about her experience meeting Todd Underwood. You see, Amy had preached that week on the Sermon on the Mount, particularly singling out Jesus' commandments to love our enemies. There, she told the story of Todd Underwood, owner of United Gun Group, which is, as they describe, a "social marketplace for the firearms community," and were, as they are now known, the platform through which George Zimmerman sold the gun he used to kill Trayvon Martin.

You see, Todd had participated in a social experiment run by a group called Narrative 4, where people on opposing sides of the gun control debate meet each other, spend time together, and share their stories. Todd had met Carolyn Tuft, a mother of four whose youngest daughter had been shot in the mall where they were buying Valentine's cards. Together, they did the hard

and necessary work to sift through all that divides and distances so as to find even the smallest patch of common ground to sit upon for a moment.

Amy had told this story in her sermon called “The Hardest Commandment,” and not too long thereafter, she received a message from Todd. “Can we talk?,” he asked. Amy named her general nervousness as they arranged for a time to meet, and after they had exchanged the usual greetings at the beginning of the call, Todd then stuns her by saying this: “I read your sermon where you mentioned me and I know you were talking about loving our enemies and I wanted to know if you thought of me as the enemy in that story.”

Amy named how this question caught her off guard, immediately asking that she lay down the assumptions she’d carried about Todd. She told him no, that “she thought the story was a great example of the tremendously difficult work of human relationship, how when we love our “enemies” — that is, see their humanity and risk relationship with people who believe the exact opposite that we do — we sometimes find there are things we share in common.”

And wouldn’t you know it, over the course of the 30-minute conversation that followed, they’d discover some common ground. Yes, there were clear differences over all the places you might expect a conservative man living in rural Missouri and a liberal woman living in New York City to have: abortion, politics, the 2nd Amendment, racism, education, you name it. Yet when their conversation turned back to scripture, Amy asked Todd, “Todd, if you could sum up the Bible in one sentence, what would it be?”

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself,” he replied. After a couple of beats I said, “Wow. That’s exactly what I would have said.”

“In that moment,” Amy continued, “I felt we stepped onto a small piece of ground that was shared, where each of us moved over to make room for the other and where we understood each other in ways that surprised both of us. And where I was jarred by, well, his humanity. His personhood.... But he listened to me. And I listened to him. And we landed in an easy alliance where we agreed to disagree and not to allow that disagreement to preclude friendship. It was the strangest feeling.”⁴

The complexities and passions of a story like this are many, and there are far more layers to relationships forged within the stain of racial violence than we can unpack today. But I hope we all can hear in Amy and Todd’s story the hard and necessary work of plank-dislodging when the stakes are so very high, of asking the question that Anthony de Mello posed about what of me is being revealed in the anger or irritation or judgment I feel toward another, of wrestling with the wholly and holy inconvenient truth that each and every one of us bears the image of God in this world. Judgment aside, Amy and Todd kept talking and listening, and perhaps we might do that too.

V.

So friends, what if this week you considered your place? What if you pruned and plowed the hard ground of your judgment, not by obsessing a

⁴ Amy Butler, “I preached about a gun rights advocate. He wasn’t who I thought,” <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/06/23/liberal-pastor-conservative-gun-activist-we-have-to-keep-talking-amy-butler-column/103007558/>

moment longer about the other person giving you such heartburn, but about turning a gentle eye toward your own soil? What if, each day this week, you identified one judgment you've been carrying and asked, and sought, and knocked to God to help you locate your own plank within? What if you sat with those self-discoveries and got curious about them, not beating yourself up for them, but seeking instead to learn something God would have you to learn?

I bet that the doubts and loves and curiosities and humilities would soften that ground and make fertile the soil. And I wonder if the flowers of spring might just press through, surprising you with new life once again.

Amen!