

“SPACE FOR GRACE”

Matthew 18:21-35; Matthew 7:1-6

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Twenty years ago, when the Presbyterian Church was embroiled in the debate around the ordination of lesbians and gays, I was accused of having no respect for the authority of scripture. This charge was generally thrown at those of us who believed that ordination should be based on one's giftedness for ministry and not on one's sexual orientation. I'd never really taken personal offense at this until this forum where we were supposed to hear each other's views and this colleague blamed "liberals" for abandoning the Bible. I felt judged... not guilty, but judged.

For some reason, I recalled this scripture, and began to fashion in my mind the plank in my colleague's eye. He'd basically taken six verses scattered throughout the Bible, removed them from their context, read them literally and ignored the rest of scripture. He'd missed all that wonderful stuff about grace, love and mercy. He'd missed Paul's emphasis on salvation by grace and not by the works of the law. He'd missed that those who had disagreed with him were also making biblical arguments.

I won't say that my analysis of the situation was wrong: that having charged others with abusing the Bible, he was in fact being more abusive of the scripture's intentions; but my use of this text was not in the spirit of Jesus' words: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged."

These are well known words and often referred to as a way of heading off embarrassment and forestalling criticism. In my work on Committee on Ministry, I was recently reminded how easy it is to feel judged in the midst of disagreement... and how easy it is to become defensive and return judgment. In our efforts to protect our own dignity, we have developed a long list of hypocrites.

We do this, not just for self-protection, which is understandable, but also to advance our own self-interest. Politicians head the list of targets. We've seen them accused of using office for personal gain, of preaching high moral values while having affairs, of representing big donors over the interest of average Americans, and of bending the facts to suit their own agenda. Even though individual criticisms may be partisan, the overall effect crosses the political spectrum, so much so that many people would agree that you can't trust politicians, no matter what party they represent.

But as I said the list of hypocrites is long and not limited to politicians. Many believe that the media is not to be trusted, at least certain media. Historically, the poor have been accused of cheating the system, teachers have been accused of compromising quality education in the greed for more money and better benefits. Black people are violent. Immigrants are stealing jobs. Gay people are responsible for the decline of the institution of marriage. Maybe your list is more of a personal nature. It goes without

saying that some of those on lists are more deserving of blame than others. Some of our judgments do reflect reality. But some do not. Some are far off the truth.

So perhaps we should be clear about Jesus' intentions here. He is not inviting us to exercise a more severe judgment of those who judge us, and he is not asking us to become skilled in spotting hypocrisy. He is warning us against the dangers of *judgmentalism*, a kind of judgment that carries a condemnatory tone.

Let's also be clear that even though what he says here has relevance for the world, he is not expressly speaking to the world. His primary concern is the community of believers. The Sermon on the Mount is first and foremost for disciples.

Jesus has just finished talking about the wonderful, providing love of God for the community. Focus on God, he says, and you'll be provided for. And now he jumps right in to the chief enemy of Christian community. When we judge one another community falls apart. Judgment brings on a cycle of judgment. It exposes hypocrisy which only leads to more judgment, which only leads to the breakdown of trust, the loss of faith. And a community of faith without the faith is no community at all.

Seems so simple: "Do not judge..." – so easy to remember when we are the one under the microscope – so difficult as we look on the actions and words of others. So easy when the community is in agreement - so difficult in the face of opposing opinions. So easy when the worship time suits you – so difficult when session changes the time and you'd only joined the church because this was the perfect time. Hard not to take it personally. So easy when you like the music - so difficult when there hasn't been anything you liked for a month. So easy when you agree with the session's adoption of an inclusive welcome statement – so difficult when viewed from the perspective of one who sees it as approval for what one regards as sinful. If only people would stop having new ideas and changing the way we've always done things - if only people would stop talking and stop doing, we could stop judging. Or could we?

Just to make matters a little more difficult, Jesus isn't actually telling us to stop judging... he's telling us to take the condemnation out of it. He still expects us to exercise good judgment. This is why some pastors emphasize that Jesus is telling us not to be judgmental. Others choose to distinguish between judgment and discernment. It's clear that Jesus understands some distinction between the two because the very next thing he tells his followers is not to throw what is holy before dogs. Ironically, some accuse Jesus of being judgmental by suggesting that some people are dogs, by which Jesus does not mean the beloved family pet. Dogs were in his day a nuisance to the community.

I don't want to get sidetracked on this point, but you might consider the parable we read as an illustration of his point: the unforgiving servant being the "dog" and the mercy offered by the king as the holy things. In that parable the servant self-selects as a dog in his failure to exercise mercy over the man with a smaller debt. In the end the holy thing - the mercy - is withdrawn. This is the advice Jesus gives his disciples more tactfully in

Luke's gospel when he sends them out with the good news. Stay with those who receive the message, but leave those villages where the message is not received and as a witness against them wipe the dust from your feet as you leave. However you see it, Jesus affirms here and in other places the need to exercise good judgment. We'll encounter more of those examples when we talk about the rest of this chapter in the next couple weeks.

So let me sum up where we are: Jesus is saying, "Do not judge... but do judge." Maybe I should rephrase that? Jesus is asking us to let go of our tendency to make quick negative judgments about others and asking us to exercise wisdom. Now I haven't used this word, "wisdom" before, but I think it fits the context well. The emphasis in the book of Proverbs (which is what we'll be studying in the Wednesday morning Bible Study this fall)... the emphasis is on wisdom, and wisdom is always about seeking understanding. So for example, instead of condemning the gay, married couple, you should actually listen to their story, learn about their faith, their love for God. Homosexuality isn't becoming more accepted in our culture because America is losing its moral focus; it's accepted because enough people have met and talked to faith-filled gay and lesbian people and they have witnessed God's blessing upon their relationships. They let go of judgment and they embraced understanding.

We function so much better as a community of faith when we are listening to each other, seeking understanding. When we gossip only with those who agree with our point of view, when we strategize and manipulate in order to get our way without regard for the views and desires of others, we break down trust, we lose faith with each other, and we compromise community. This is not to say that there is no place for disagreement, but the relationships matter more. The loving way is more important than the "right way." There is a way of moving through disagreement that builds relationships, multiplies trust, and strengthens community.

Most of you will be aware that I stole the sermon title from Nelson Lumm. I don't generally go for that rhyme-y sort of thing, but I thought it expressed well what Jesus is after here. When we let go of judgment and seek understanding, we are making "space for grace." We are focused on building up, not tearing down. We are embracing hope over despair, practicing reconciliation instead of division. We are embracing the gospel of freedom and not the politics of destruction.

For those who love the church, and I count myself among them, nothing grieves them like a church trapped in negativity and nothing delights them like a body of believers whose love so clearly binds them together. These few verses present us with a stark choice. We may seek our own interest, think ourselves better or more right than the next person and build a space around ourselves in which nothing can flourish - or we can create a space in which the grace of God moves freely and abundantly. For this of course we must rely on God's love, patience, and forgiveness. Let go of judgment - seek understanding - make "space for grace." Amen.