



February 20, 2022: The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Less Judgment, More Compassion

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Oh LORD: May Your Word only be spoken; and may your Word only be heard; in the name of Jesus Christ, the living word. Amen.

Last week we began an encounter with Jesus' core teaching on what God cares about as remembered in the Gospel of Luke. You'll recall the Blessings and Woes, and how they emphasized God's heart for the poor, hungry, sorrowful, and despised. And we wrestled with how we as affluent Christians are to hear what appears to be God's judgment on those who are rich, full, happy, and well-regarded. And we found that we were able to resolve some tension by seeing Jesus' "woes" not as condemnation, but rather as warning about the dangers of being satisfied, and how this condition can dull our awareness of, and compassion for, those who are poor, hungry, sorrowful and despised, and can get in the way of realizing our own utter dependence on God for our true salvation.

This week's continuation of the Sermon on a Level Place begins in an interesting way. The English before us reads, "And Jesus said, 'I say to you that listen...'" From what I have learned in my study this week, it may be more grammatically accurate to render the Greek as, "And Jesus said 'to those of you who are *still listening*' or "to those of you who *are continuing to listen....*" Another translation, *The Message*, renders the Greek like this: "To you who are ready for the truth, I say..."

That seems more fitting, right, for what comes next!?! Last week's teachings were hard for us, though we managed to soften the edges a bit. Whew!

But this week, Jesus is really challenging us. Love our enemies? Pray for those who persecute us? Turn the other cheek? Let people steal from us? Give stuff away and not expect anything in return? Are we still listening? Are we ready for the truth? I mean, it's tempting just to throw up our hands in helplessness and decide, "I'm going to follow Jesus when it's convenient and not too challenging, because this is impossible!" It's insane in the real world that we live in. It could lead to domestic abuse, rampant theft, and acquiescence in the face of destruction and disorder. It's not going to stop the Russians from invading Ukraine or make people who think that the election was stolen change their minds or stop exploitative lending practices that lead to homelessness.

Are we still listening? Or are we tuning out? Each phrase presents its own challenges and calls forth a defensive reaction, triggering some part of our attachment to the status quo, or bring to light a hidden fear or festering hurt, or maybe even, an invitation to freedom. Unpacking and living this sermon is the work of a lifetime. And so, this morning we take up just a little piece.

But first, a little framing that may help. And I give another shout out to the Men's Prayer Group for bringing to my attention some teaching on this passage that may give us some traction.

Many of us go about life with the mistaken conviction that if other people were different, my life, our lives would be better. If my spouse would start putting the toothpaste cap on the toothpaste, I wouldn't start the morning in a bad mood. If my boss were more fair, I would be more satisfied at work. If people



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would just have the same political beliefs that I do, the world would be a better place. If my father had been more loving, I would be a better father, etc.

Jesus nips that evasive thinking in the bud later in on, in a passage just beyond what we heard today: “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.” (Luke 6.41-42)

In the 12-step tradition, this is called “keeping our side of the street clean.” In recovery, one of the things to learn is that we only have control over our own behavior, and that we are accountable for our own actions, no one else's. It is fruitless to try to control how other people conduct themselves in the world. Once we accept the fact that Jesus is placing us in charge of our own attitudes and actions, with God's help

and the help of the community, we begin the journey, again, to live the Jesus life. We can break off little bits of these teachings and begin to work on them.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.”

I confess that I struggle with judgmentalism. I may be able to hide it from others some, maybe even most, of the time. But those who know me best, in the Rectory, know that this is something I struggle with. Judgementalism goes beyond discernment or observation, but sprinkles in a measure of scorn or condescension. Judgementalism can be quite damaging in relationships, not just to those who are being judged, but to that the judger. And I don't have to tell you how corrosive and polarizing judgementalism is in the wider culture.

Being judgmental is a great weight around the neck. It is a padlock on the heart. It is a blindfold to the eyes. Learning to let go of judgment not only frees the other person from attack, it frees the judger. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” In his pre-modern way, I think Jesus is referring to the fact that judgmental people are often hardest on themselves, and they project that judgment out onto those nearest them. Jesus says elsewhere in this same passage, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Our health and thriving is inextricably connected with the health and thriving of others.

So, it happens that my prayer in the recent past has been for less judgement, more compassion. It turns out that, as I learned in my study this week, that the word translated as *merciful* this morning in the New Revised Standard Version, the Greek word *oiktirmon*, is actually better translated as *compassionate*. “Be compassionate,” Jesus says, “just as your Father is compassionate.” The difference between mercy and compassion I think is important. Mercy can be a bit condescending. It's something a superior confers on a misbehaving subordinate. Compassion is the shoulder-to-shoulder sharing of at least some of another's pain, not hiding behind rank or power. Literally, compassion means, “to feel with.” Compassion moves



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us to do something about that pain. “Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate,” Jesus teaches. This is, in fact, what God does in Jesus. It’s what Jesus does for us, if we follow him and ask for his help. What a relief.

So perhaps, as we ponder this text, this cabinet full of concentrated spiritual vitamins, let us pick just one that we find especially irritating, or fascinating; one that triggers our defenses, or our curiosity. And pray with that this week. “Jesus, help me to do something kind this week and let go of the desire for recognition.” “Jesus, help me pray for someone who hurts me this week, rather than seek revenge.” “Jesus, help me with less judgment, more compassion.” “Jesus, help us to follow you this week.”

Amen.