

CAN JUDGING AND LOVING GO TOGETHER?

Matthew 7: 1-5. Matthew 23: 1-3,5-15.

Armine's family came to Canada as immigrants when she was a child. They fled a civil war that raged in Lebanon for over a decade in the 1980s. As minority Armenians, they were extra vulnerable as bystanders in a brutal conflict that was claiming many lives all around them. Coming to Canada they experienced a welcome and a peace that promised full citizenship in time, something they had never known before. Armine's parents started a business and worked hard to build a life successfully. They became proud Canadians and felt extremely grateful for having a place to live that was safe and secure.

But even as they raised their daughter as good Canadians, in time, and especially beginning in university, Armine would come home and tell them some of the less positive things about their beloved Canada. She became involved with groups and protest movements calling for justice for indigenous peoples whose land had been stolen and whom the government of Canada along with its institutions had tried to eradicate over several hundred years. Such actions were now recognized to be genocidal. She also became involved with environmental activism recognizing that for all its claims and promises, Canada was not serious about making significant shifts in policies and laws to protect the environment and move toward a carbon free future.

While Armine's parents loved their daughter more than life itself and loved her energy, enthusiasm and passion, criticizing the government and Canada itself was a redline they could never accept. As good Christians they reminded Armine that our place is not to judge, but to demonstrate love and gratitude rather than criticism. Armine, on the other hand, argued that her outrage, activism and protest against the government arose because she cared enough to speak out and do something about it. Being passive and just accepting things without questioning them was no way to be. Justice demands we judge those who do wrong and stop them any way we can short of violence. To refrain from judging and keeping silent about injustice only serves the purposes of evil in the world.

OK, but where do we draw the line? Who among us has never felt the sting of being judged and criticized in a way that has made us feel small, inadequate and awful about ourselves? But who among us has never judged and criticized others when we have felt angry, frustrated or hurt by their actions or failures to act? So where do we draw the line? How do we make sense of the bible's seemingly contradictory statements about judging, and contradictory statements we find in Jesus himself among other prophetic and apostolic voices?

Well, here we need to dive more deeply into our scripture readings seeking some revelatory wisdom and guidance on judging and making judgements. And while I could have chosen from

any of dozens of passages throughout the bible, I have chosen statements from Jesus himself to get to the heart of it all.

Our first reading is part of a larger teaching which is at the core of Jesus' gospel. It is known as "the sermon on the mount." It is equivalent to the 10 commandments given to Moses also on a mountain. Here it is Jesus himself who is the voice of God speaking. And what does Jesus say? "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For the judgement you give will be the judgement you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your neighbour's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?" I can't tell you how often this verse is quoted on the theme of judgement. And it's a good reminder for sure. Judging is harmful and damaging whenever it happens and to whomever it is directed. But like so many statements, context is everything, isn't it? Is this true in all cases and in every situation? Should we not judge someone like Donald Trump when he makes vile statements about other people and another civilization? And should we not judge leaders who brutalize and oppress their people? Is Jesus saying that we should simply not judge and keep things to ourselves?

Absolutely not! If we read the very next sentence, Jesus is doing some pretty harsh judging himself. And this is important to note because Jesus is very specific as to what he is judging. He is judging what he calls hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is a very big theme in the gospels, and a blistering accusation Jesus makes against some people, and especially those in power. But he begins with everyday people like you and me. Why do we so quickly see the problem in someone else's behaviour but fail to see the problem in our own? Or why is it we are so quick to interpret someone else's behaviour in more negative terms, especially if we already have a problem with them, while we are so ready to make excuses for ourselves or minimize the negative effects of our actions? This is hypocrisy and most all of us are guilty of hypocrisy here and there, especially as we are triggered by certain people and certain behaviours.

We may not do the same things as someone else that may be a problem, but we do other things which can affect other people whether we are aware of such an affect or are oblivious to it. How much do we really see another person when we are making judgements against them and how much do others truly see us in making judgements against us? Do they interpret what we say or do with compassion and understanding or with a critical eye looking for what may be wrong?

The deeper issue is hypocrisy. If we became ever more aware of our own failings and mistakes that would go a long way in keeping us from our propensity to judge other people, wouldn't it? As Jesus says in another well-known passage, when certain men of standing bring a woman to Jesus who has been caught in socially aberrant behaviour, what is Jesus' response to them? "He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone at her." In other words, who here doesn't have failures and mistakes deserving condemnation? So why are you so ready to publicly shame, humiliate and punish this woman based on your judgements of her behaviour?

But this also leads us to our second reading which is full of judgement, and very specifically directed judgement as well. To properly understand what Jesus is judging specifically, we need to understand the context and the people so judged. Religious authorities in Jesus' day were also those with the power and influence within their society. It would be equivalent to what those in power and authority in a place like Iran or other theocracies in the world are like. You use your religious authority to guilt, shame and humiliate people as a form of control over them minimizing the need for force and other more demanding forms of coercion.

But Jesus is not totally dismissive of them either. They do teach the 10 commandments which can be summarized as love of God and neighbour as the foundation of religious law. The problem is that they distort God's law in several oppressive ways.

First, while they teach the law in a strict way and are more than ready to judge people who fail to live up to its demands, they themselves fail to live up to those demands as any human full of imperfections would. But they find all kinds of ways to rationalize and justify their bypassing of the law to serve their own interests. They pretend they fulfill the law perfectly because they can justify anything they do given their authority and expertise to make it say what they want. And more than that. Because they see themselves as so much better than others they are more than ready to teach and instruct others who are so far below them. But how dishonest they are when they do this! They are hypocrites who try to deceive others as much as themselves. They lack sincerity and humility, and they are more than ready to judge, judge in order to keep people down and subservient to them. Jesus is basically saying: do as they say but not as they do.

Second, and even worse, by their power and zeal to convert others to their ways, the religious authorities poison people into behaving as they do, namely, being quick to judge others while justifying themselves. This is very much consistent with what Jesus says in our first reading, isn't it. Anyone of us can behave just like the religious authorities behave when we are quick to judge and put people down as a way of controlling them and exalting ourselves in the process. Not only does this do harm to other people, but it encourages dishonesty, insincerity and deceit in ourselves.

But finally, and perhaps worst of all, by behaving in this judgemental way we malign God and who God is as Jesus is revealing and embodying God. We deceive ourselves and others into believing that God will only accept us according to how perfectly we uphold religious law. Our judgemental and condemning spirit is projected into our image of God as a judge who will accept nothing but perfection and condemn every imperfection.

This, according to Jesus, is a total contradiction of the gospel and an absolutely vile image of God. Honesty and sincerity, which would naturally lead to humility, is the only way to properly

approach God. And the good news of the gospel is that God's heart is totally the same love God calls each one of us to grow into as authentic children of our creator and Abba. Love is open to others and love is ready to see others past the contradictions, judgements and misbehaviors that are a part of life, especially under struggle and stress. And only from a foundation of love in honesty, sincerity and humility does genuine growth in love and the fulfilling of the law of love ever become possible.

This also means we hold together as Christians both our imperfection and our call to love. We will never get it right all the time, but we are on a healing and transforming journey that will only be completed in the life to come. Our job today is to question our judgements, examine ourselves, and purify ourselves with honesty as to the spirit and motivation of our judgements. We confess our failures, seek to heal our relationships where we have been responsible for hurt in others, and seek out forgiveness in order to heal ourselves on a healthy foundation. And a good practice for us always is to make sure we judge ourselves before making any judgements about anyone else.

So what about Armine and her parents? Both sides have an important message for us all. Our call is always to make our world, our nation and ourselves better, and this means we need to be held accountable to a higher standard. This also means acknowledging wrongs in our lives and our world and calling them out. We can do better and it only serves us and our nation to be challenged to be better.

On the other hand, it is important to be grateful, compassionate and see the good in people and our nation as much as making our judgements against them. If we cannot see any good and cannot find a heart for gratitude and appreciation, we need to ask ourselves whether we have lost the core place of love in us which should be at the heart of all our interactions. Yes, love demands we get upset and even outraged at injustice wherever it happens in our personal lives and our world. But outrage also has to be open to understanding, compassion and acknowledgment of imperfections based on circumstances that pressure people to make choices that can also be harmful to themselves and others. The better way to change always has to involve trust and trust can only come when people see our caring for them behind our judgements.

So then, How do we respond to Jesus' challenge not to judge for fear of inevitably falling into hypocrisy in so doing? We need to follow Jesus' example. We make judgements and demand accountability and change because we love and care for our world, each other and ourselves. Evil is very well served if we keep to ourselves and refrain from judging. On the other hand, we must examine ourselves and focus on ourselves with every judgement we make, recognizing that even as we may judge someone else for doing something we don't do, there are other things we do that are far from perfect or good. We are all on a journey toward wholeness however far we have come. Let us in humility, sincerity and openness continue to welcome the

grace of God's love into our lives. And let us share such love with those around us, especially those who are broken by judgement, and those who are fired up making judgements. Let us learn how to better love.

PRAYER: Come to us, O God, and meet us where we are... Meet us in our judgements. Meet us in our arrogance, presuming we can teach and instruct others because we are better. Remind us of our humanity which we share with everyone else. Soften our critical spirit. Open our hearts to grace, a grace we need as much as a grace others need from us... In Jesus' name... Amen.