

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Andrew McDonald preaching
“The Purpose Behind Judging and Healing”
February 23, 2020
Matthew 5: 20—26; 38-45, Matthew 6: 28—7:5

How are we to think about the main body of the Sermon on the Mount? After the beatitudes, after the call for the disciples to be salt and light, are all these images of judgment.

Don't you feel a bit of a split personality in thinking about this? On the one hand, We live in a time when people are allergic to judging. Anything that smacks of judgment is immediately rejected: “Don't judge me, bro.”

On the other hand, and then we give the ultimate justification: “But can't you see, I'm just trying to help!” (It feel so good to say that: so self-righteous! And deep down we may feel like adding, “And you, you ignorant wretch, would be so much better off if you would just listen to me!”)

If we stop and reflect, there is some real wisdom in rejecting judgementalism. When Judgmentalism the knee jerk reaction when we think the Bible is a book of rules that must be imposed on everyone. Judgmentalism as a lifestyle, a worldview, a way of being, with the implication of and orientation to, looking down on others.

As if all we have to do to be right, is to quote some obscure passage of scripture, and therefore damn someone else and justify ourselves, so we can keep on doing whatever we want. So, Yes, we want to reject judgementalism.

But when you stop and think about it, we have to have some standards, some laws, some ways to say: Stop. No more. That is harmful to society. And Jesus makes it clear, we get to keep the law. So thank you Jesus, for admitting that we need to have the laws. The Torah.

But Jesus does not just leave it at the law. Look further at what is going on in these stories. Jesus does not just quote the law, he intensifies it.

It is not just murder that is the problem, it is anger. It is the very language we use to describe others. You call your brother an airhead (that's the literal translation of fool), you go to ghenna for that too: Hell: a garbage dump on the edge of town. The angry people are as bad as the murderers, they have already murdered them in their heart.

It is not just adultery that is wrong, it is lust. To look at someone: to objectify them. Use them. Jesus uses Intensification. Intensification to the point of absurdity.

We started out cheering Jesus on, saying, yes, those bad people out there: those murders, they should be judged! But then he intensifies it and says, even when you call someone an idiot. Well, if that is the

case, intensification leads to the point where we have to admit, we are guilty too.

You shall not murder or you will be liable to judgment. I say, even if you say your brother (or sister) is a fool, you can be judged.

Jesus' point in this: it is the heart of the law: to keep your brother a brother. It's how children of the kingdom live. The question is not just, 'Did you break your brother's arm?' It is more: 'Did you break your brother's heart?' With your words. Did your words, tone, even your silence, have a damning effect? Or were they helpful, healing?

The Law says, "Thou shall not kill." Jesus says, "Don't even insult your someone." The heart of the law, is to keep in covenant relationship. The point is not to make everyone go around feeling guilty. The point is to make everyone aware of their own faults, past sins, present sins.

So that when we judge, which we all have to do, we end up asking: what is the point of all this judging? Does it break relationships or build them?

Sexuality is good. It can bring people together in love. It can also divide, disrupt and destroy. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. This is hyperbole. The point is: the kingdom of heaven is so precious, so much of a treasure, that nothing should be allowed to interfere with it. So be careful of your attitude, of what we allow to take root in our imaginations,

Lust goes to the heart of a person, a distortion of human will, of an intention to break a sacred covenant, lurking just this side of action. Lust is like a pit-bull, straining at the leash with the desire to be kept warm, fed, petted, nurtured until it springs into destructive action.

Jesus talks a lot about the eye. "The eye is the lamp of the body. If the eye is sound, the judgment is sound." He also says: "Don't try to take the speck out of someone else's eye, until you've taken the tree out of your own eye."

He does not reject our wish to take the speck out of someone else's eye. They are suffering. They can't see clearly. But first, before you judge someone else deeply examine yourself, your own motivations, your own blindness.

Examine yourself: what multiple branches-in-the-eye are blinding you? Only Then. ONLY THEN, WHEN YOU have been healed, when you can see yourself clearly, only then can you be an effective healer.

Jesus uses this wonderful creative and effective mixing of metaphors. Are we judges: judging? Or are we eye doctors, healing sight? Which is it? The answer is both: The doctor is the judge, and the judge is the doctor. Who is the Doctor? The judge. The point of the judging is to truly heal. To bring health. To set you free to live.

Paul Ricoeur wrote: The Symbol gives birth to thought." Jesus speaks in all this symbolic language. Consider the lilies of the field. Consider the birds of the air. The Greek word does not mean: glance at. It means look at them deeply. Study them. Symbolic speech: Does he really mean birds? Maybe.

Does he mean those people around you, who live simply, peacefully, with a sense of trust in God's providing hand?

Jesus gives this cascade of symbolic speech to make us look at our lives, and think deeply about not just the law of God, but the heart of God behind the law. The heart that wishes to heal, built trust, build relationships.

If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek so they can strike it as well. If someone asks for your coat, give them your shirt as well. If someone forces you to carry their burden for a mile, carry it two miles.

There is a judgment in that: that seeks transcendence. Not domination, but healing. Hope. Freedom.

"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light. The filter of light determines how little you can do, or how much.

Don't let someone else determine your filter. The filter of how you see the world. Jesus wants us to see through the heart of God. Symbol at the center. Don't let anyone else determine who you are.

In the classic movie, "Cool Hand Luke," it's a hot August day in the Southland. The guards take the chain gang out to work shoveling sand on a freshly tarred road. The hot, black oil intensifies the heat. The guards have done this to the prisoners before, chosen the hottest day for the hardest work. The prisoners know it is back-breaking work, and it is going to take all day.

They start out shoveling slowly. Everybody except Luke. Luke is shoveling like a mad man. Drag Line tells him to slow down, he's got to last all day. Luke replies like he's slapping the reins on a team of horses: "Hiyahhh. Get the man." And he just keeps going. So Drag Line says, "Hiyahhh. Get the man." And he starts shoveling like a mad man.

Soon the whole work crew has the gravel flying onto the road so fast, the guards have to dance to get out of the way. Then all of a sudden, someone says, "Hey, where'd the road go?" Luke says, there ain't no more. They are finished. Drag Line says, "There must be two hours of daylight left. What are we going to do now?" Luke is sitting on his shovel like it's a lawn chair, smiles and says, "Nothin." The whole chain gang, relaxing in the summer sun, with nothing to do.

That's one example of the world being turned upside down, as when Jesus says, if someone asks for your coat, give them your shirt as well. To go one mile go, two. Intensification of the law. It's not a bare minimum world. It's like one of those people who doesn't just pay their taxes – they pay more to help cover the costs. Those people who are free. These are powerful people.

Jesus lifts up 6 intensifications of the law. Six examples of greater righteousness. The Scribes and the Pharisees are doing right. But the Christians are looking to the heart of the law. An overabundant righteousness that flows with grace. A powerful radiance that spreads over the sky.

It is not just "What is the law?" The question is, "What is the will of God behind this law?" If God is love, what is the will of love behind this law?

It is not practicing some silly sort of “one-ups-manship.” It is a different kind of righteousness, that seeks to live in the alternate righteousness known as the kingdom of God.

The church is a colony of the kingdom of heaven placed in the midst of an alien culture. In a bellicose world, they are peacemakers. In a world that turns its head away from unpleasant sights, they mourn for the homeless, for the refugee, for the lost, for the brokenhearted.

Anger, divorce, sexuality, and more. What is going on? Jesus is saying, judgment is God’s exercise of good judgment, with the intent of repairing the harm humans do to one another. Like a surgeon’s scalpel. You can be a great healer. It is God setting things right. But the first one you have to operate on is yourself.