

"JUDGING OTHERS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 29, 1996

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INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago there was a Jules Feiffer strip that went something like this. A man is talking on the telephone and you can only hear his side of the conversation. It goes like this...

"Yes...mother....I've had a very hard day. Gladys has been most difficult. I know I ought to be more firm, but, mother, it's so hard! You know how she is. Yes, I remember that you warned me. I remember you told me she was a vile creature and that she'd make my life miserable...and you begged me not to marry her. You were perfectly right. You want to talk to her? All right....I'll call her...hold on...."

He looks up from the 'phone and calls to his wife in the next room. "Gladys... your mother wants to talk to you....Gladys". Well, no one likes to be criticized and it hurts...yes, it really hurts when it's someone in your own family!

DEVELOPMENT

St. Paul saw it happening in his family...in the Church. For Christianity was taking in new recruits all the time and in rapid fashion. Some of those new believers were coming from the ranks of the orthodox Jews and many of them...especially those who were coming in from Paul's influence...many of them had been "pagan" Gentiles. And just like in a marriage, each new convert brought along into the Christian family his or her own traditions, values, preferences and way of doing things. I'm sure there were times when Paul had to get his whistle out and play the role of referee.

You see some of those new believers were still attached to the Jewish Sabbath. Others sincerely believed that all days are holy and that one day is not to be lifted above others. Some of them fasted while others saw no need for fasting. Some were meat eaters while others were vegetarians. I'm sure that the disagreements within the early church were numerous, but worse than that... those disagreements had a way of becoming "personal".

Soon people were passing judgement on others who did not follow the same customs that they did. The church was becoming divided and Paul felt obligated to say something about it. First, he wanted them to "cool it". He felt the church was big enough for differing opinions on secondary matters. The important thing was that whatever their beliefs, their lives were to give glory to God. And out of this conflict within the Church comes a bit of a lesson from Paul's magnificent Letter to the Romans.

Passing judgement on others is still a bit of a problem in the Church. A pastor down in Bluefield, West Virginia, by the name of Clot...Walter Clot... tells about a man who confronted him at the door one Sunday after church. He said,

"Preacher....I have two complaints to share with you." "What are they?" asked the pastor. The man said, "Well...first... when I was chairman of our Property Committee, you tried to tell me how to do the job. You should just let the church leaders do their job....the way they want to...."

The minister listened quietly and then said, "Yes...and what's the second complaint?"

"Well" said the man. "I don't like the hymns that the organist picks out.....I wish you'd tell him to pick more of the old ones...you know the ones I like...."

Now, obviously...the man was not aware of the mixed message he was giving. Here, on the one hand, he wanted the pastor to refrain from telling lay people how to do their jobs, but then, on the other hand, he wanted his pastor to tell the song leader or organist what hymns to sing. You know, at times...people are really amazing. Perhaps we ought to install an answering machine in the church like the one I bumped in to in one of the stores here in the city. It went like this,

"If you are calling to place an order, PRESS 3. If you are calling to register a complaint, please press 576 - 296 - 047 - 320 - 573 - 030 - 658. Have a good day!"

'Course I'm exaggerating. Why 99% of church people are kind and thoughtful and gracious and well-intended and most supportive. But those of us who have leadership tasks and roles in the church...whether as teachers or musicians or whatever....remember we're human beings and words sometimes sting.

A cartoon strip portrayed a parishioner approaching the minister after the service and saying,

"Reverend, I want you to know that really wasn't one of your better sermons." And openly the pastor responds with, "And Bill....I want you to know I'm always grateful for your constructive criticism". And then in the next frame, it shows the minister alking into his study...locking the door...kicking the waste paper basket....falling on his knees and crying out with a loud wail and with deep anguish....the paper didn't print what he said.

Obviously, this is not a problem that is isolated to the church. I've known of families where members do great damage to one another because of caustic and unkind remarks. What's that old saying in the Navy? "The Captain bites his tongue until it bleeds." This expression refers to the way a ship's captain feels as he silently stands by while allowing a Junior Officer to bring the ship alongside the dock for the first time.

Many of us need to pray for that ability to bite our tongue unless we can offer encouragement and support...wether it's to our children, a spouse, those with whom we work, others in the church family...or wherever we may travel. A loose cannon can do a lot of harm.

Let me suggest a couple of questions we might just ask ourselves before we pass judgement on someone else's efforts.

KNOW ALL THE FACTS

First of all, are you sure you know all the facts. To me that a good question to ask when you're tempted to unleash some criticism upon another.

A colleague tells of returning home at night following a football game in a city about three hours away. Backing out of a McDonald's parking lot before starting home, another car hit them from the front with little damage done but the "high beams" affected...so that he had to drive home on a two lane highway for some distance with his "high lights" on. And all of us know what reaction that can produce in oncoming cars.

Some would honk. Others would retaliate and **switch on their high beams**. Some even swerved in his direction and made a vulgar sign. He had no way of communicating that he couldn't help his condition. His lights were stuck on bright. He wanted to yell back...."Hey, friend....I can't help it"...but, of course, he was in no position to do that. Anyway...he said that God sort of spoke to his spirit and said that there are many in the church...just like his car...with their lights stuck on bright. They can be loud and glaring and at times a bit obnoxious and say hurtful things and bother others, but at that point...they really can't help it. We need to understand them and try to help them and inister to them rather than trying to run them off the road (or out of the church), or trying to "out-bright" them. Yes, some people simply have their lights STUCK on HIGH BEAM for a while and really can't help it. Help us, Lord, to love the unloveable.

A **Catholic priest** and friend, Michael Mulvaney, told of travelling a great distance at his own expense to talk to a high school group on self-esteem and such. The group was antsy and inattentive. He said there was a small clique in the rear and a teenager girl there who was so rude....she even had her back turned to him as she blithely went on with her own conversation. Finally, Father Mike...a good and kind priest (but weary and frustrated) singled out this girl with her back to him and in a rather exasperated tone said,

"Look young lady....I don't know your name...but I've come some distance to be with you and I think I deserve to be treated with some respect....you can, at least, give me the courtesy to turn around and look at me! You really have no right to be so rude....."

Let me tell you what happened. The poor girl was so embarrassed and so distressed to be "singled out". With tears of humiliation and shame in her eyes, she said,

"Father....I'm so sorry. But these are our deaf students, and I was translating your talk to them....I'M sorry...."

As you can well imagine, Father Michael wanted to drop through a hole in the ground and never reappear. How often I've thought....if only we knew all the facts what a difference it would make.

Remember how after running a picture of new senators taking office, a paper received a critical and sarcastic letter from a reader who complained that "The Senator from Hawaii doesn't know his right hand from his left....and would someone please tell him!" Senator Inouye of Hawaii took the oath with his left hand raised and not the right hand. There was something that the photo in the paper did not show which the critical writer was unaware. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Dan Inouye joined the army and fought in Italy and won the DSC, the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart with clusters.

And when he took the oath of office as a Senator, he did it with his left hand raised instead of his right one because he had lost his right arm in the service of his country. We can save ourselves a lot of embarrassment if we knew all the facts before we criticized someone else. That is the first question: do you have all the facts?

THE RIGHT TO PASS JUDGEMENT

And the second question is this: have you earned the right to pass judgement? When you're tempted to belittle someone else's efforts (wherever that may be), be sure to ask if you, yourself, are doing everything you should be doing to serve Christ yourself. And, friend, if you can answer that in the affirmative, then maybe....just maybe, you're on more solid ground.

Comedian Danny Kaye often entertained at the Palladium in London where he drew standing-only room crowds. On free afternoon, he loved to roam the city or take in matinees. There was that afternoon when he took in a play that was being received with the reserve that we've come to associate with the British.

As the play was letting out, Danny Kaye overheard three officers of the British Army discussing it and all were standing stiffly to one side. The conversation, he recalls, went like this:

"Ghastly" said one. "Beastly" said the second, agreeing with the first. The third was 'tight-lipped' and didn't say a word. One of the vocal ones turned and said to him, "Colonel....what was your opinion?" The Colonel explained that he had come to the play on a pass...someone had made it possible for him to attend. "Hardly cricket to speak out under the circumstances" he added...."But...if you will excuse me for a moment...." and with that he strode to the Box Office a few feet away and bought a ticket. He was back in a moment with a ticket. "A real STINKER, gentlemen" he said...."A STINKER!"

I like that man's approach. He felt he was in no position to criticize until he bought a ticket.

Friend, when you're tempted to complain about what kind of a parent someone else is....first ask yourself whether you are entirely the kind of parent you ought to be. Or, before criticizing someone else's character, ask if you have arrived at perfection yourself. And, if you're ever tempted to criticize someone who is working hard for the church and you're not satisfied with the job he or she is doing, ask yourself...what about yourself. Do you know all the facts? Have you earned the right to pass judgement. "Judge not, that you be not judged" said Jesus...."For with the judgement you pronounce you will be judged...and the measure you give....will be the measure you get." It's still true.

And remember that only one has earned the right to judge others and He did it on a cross 2,000 years ago. And the amazing thing is that He was the most tolerant, the most loving and the most accepting and the most forgiving Man who has ever walked on this earth.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these quiet moments. Wrestle with us in the dark and hidden corners of our hearts where hard heartedness prevails and dominates. Remind us that if we concentrate on judging others we have little time left to love them. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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