

Judgment

Based on Exodus 32:7-14, Philippians 4:4-9, Matthew 22:2-10

Today we are considering the concept of judgment and what the Bible has to offer us about judgment and being judgmental. Did you know that there are six different definitions of the word 'judgment' according to Merriam-Webster? The first is the capacity to form an opinion or perform an evaluation, the next is the same as discernment (i.e., right vs wrong), the formal utterance of an authoritative opinion, a formal decision by a court, a proposition stating something believed or asserted, and finally, when the "j" is capitalized it refers to the final judging of humankind done by God.

Pastor and spiritual writer, Timothy Keller, in his book, "Coming Home" helps us understand that last definition of judgment writing, "...Imagine you have an invisible recorder around your neck that, for all your life, records every time you say to somebody else, 'You ought.' It only turns on when you tell somebody else how to live. In other words, it only records your own moral standards as you seek to impose them on other people. It records nothing except what you believe is right or wrong. And what if God, on judgment day, stands in front of people and says, 'You never (put into practice anything you) heard about Jesus Christ and you seldom [never] read the Bible, but I'm a fair-minded God. Let me show you what I'm going to use to judge you.' Then God [he] takes that invisible recorder from around your neck and says, 'I'm going to judge you by your own moral standards.' And God plays the recording...."

You see, friends, the daily judgments we make about how we're going to live, about who is worthy of our attention and charity, of who is "in" and who is "out", of who

is living up to an arbitrary moral standard by which we measure folks, of how others ought to live their lives, are all critically important decisions. All those judgments will play a role in how the Bible says we will be Judged at the end-of-times. If you question that last statement, I point you to the words of Jesus about sorting sheep from goats, of the people left out of the wedding party, of the rich man and Lazarus, of his words captured for us in Matthew Chapter 7 where he says, “for in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

Our scripture readings for today have a lot to tell us about judgment, both God’s judgment and that discernment which we can employ to live more fully into the mind and heart of Jesus. Paul is finishing his letter to the believers in Philippi with an appeal for steadfast love and unity in the Holy Spirit. Paul tells them to choose to rejoice in the Lord always and they will know the peace of Christ. They are to think about things that are excellent and praiseworthy, admirable, lovely, pure and right, noble and true and put those things into practice – to be judged by others for their gentleness. Jesus tells a challenging parable about a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. All the rich folks who were invited chose not to come. This infuriated the king, and he was swift and terrible with his judgment against them. Then, he had his servants bring in all the poor and marginalized from the streets so that the wedding hall was filled with the people who the king judged more worthy of such a feast.

Not long after God gave the people the Ten Commandments to help them order their lives with each other and God, they use poor judgment. Moses was delayed in coming down from Mount Horeb, and the people grew restless and anxious. The people needed to feel reassured that a god – any small “g” god, was at least looking

after them (even though the manna and quail continued unabated). So, they bullied Aaron into making them a golden calf such as they saw worshiped in Egypt. God was angry, as they had broken the very first Commandment about replacing God with an idol. God was about to judge the people with a capital “J” until Moses intervened on their behalf. Moses was able to change God’s mind, and to save the people from their lack of judgment, by reminding God of God’s covenant with Abraham.

What if Moses had said to God, “Sure, go ahead and eliminate all those stiff-necked Israelites? They have been a constant pain from before we followed you out of Egypt. Making a great nation out of me sure seems to be the right answer – I know my descendants won’t behave toward you like Abraham’s did.” There are many people who might have made that judgment and allowed God to follow through with God’s Judgment. However, that was neither Moses’ style of leadership nor his relationship with God and God’s people. Even though the Israelites were constantly dancing on his last nerve, still he judged them worthy of saving so that they could realize the promise of God to become a great nation. Moses was dedicated to the ideal that the people should be allowed to live to learn to make better judgments – and I think he knew God was too. He read the situation as God blowing off steam, rather than God really wanting to start all over again.

The vast majority of us humans spend a lot of our lives judging, both positively and negatively. We can choose to use “good” judgment just as easily as we can choose to employ “poor” judgment. Social media has made it readily apparent that a subsection of folks employ poor judgment routinely, usually starting with the words, “Here, hold my beer”. Throughout our lives we are constantly evaluating information,

people and situations, and are often called upon to judge the utility or truth of something. The criteria we use to help us make judgments are important – are we weighing the facts in a calm, dispassionate and fair-minded manner, or are we “flying off the handle” and judging something or someone emotionally without knowing the whole story? Are we doing our best to collect and analyze information from all sides of an issue, or are we discounting or ignoring altogether differing viewpoints or data? Further, do we ever consider the wounds and injustice that our judgmentalism inflicts?

Pastor and spiritual writer, Frederick Buechner, in his book entitled, “Beyond Words” has more to say about the constant judging that is part of being human. He writes, “...We are all of us judged every day. We are judged by the face that looks back at us from the bathroom mirror. We are judged by the faces of the people we love and by the faces and lives of our children and by our dreams. We are judged by the faces of the people we do not love. Each day finds us at the junction of many roads, and we are judged as much by the roads we have not taken as by the roads we have.

The New Testament proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future, God will ring down the final curtain on history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully....”

That is great good news indeed! The One who will ultimately Judge us is the Merciful One who loves us all unconditionally, faithfully and fair-mindedly. A God who could at any time wipe us all off the face of the Earth, continues to seek deep relationships formed with some outstanding humans who continue to intervene on our

behalf. That same God continues to give us room to make judgments which will focus on what is right, lovely, true, noble, admirable and excellent; in other words, to live more like the Christ. That same God continues to give us the free will to grow in our love for God and each other, knowing at any moment we might employ poor judgment and make idols to worship or maybe just walk away from God altogether. Though we wound God with our poor judgment, God continues to allow us to decide whether or not God is worthy of our love and fealty – whether we will believe in and fully commit to God or not. Therefore, let us use good judgment to put into practice what we have seen and heard from God, from the Patriarchs, the Prophets, the Disciple and Apostles, and most of all from Jesus. According to Paul, when we make that judgment on how to live the God of peace will be with each of us. May God's love continue to transform our judgment and our lives! Amen and amen.