

May 16, 2021

Lessons in Luke: Judging Others

Luke 6:37-42

Jeff Marian

Years ago, I went to the gym to run on the track. As I sat on the bench to lace up my shoes, I noticed a guy slowly running around the track with a small group of men. Actually, running isn't the right word for what this guy was doing; it was more like a slow gallop. His movements were awkward, as if his legs weren't the same length. His arms were flailing. He looked clownish. The men he was running with were laughing as they slowly made their way around the track. And I remember thinking to myself, "Geez, some guys will do anything to get attention." But as the group slowly passed me, I noticed that the man wasn't clowning around at all. He was disabled in some way. I later found out that he had been a serious runner but suffered a stroke at a young age. He spent a year learning how to walk again, and years more of committed work learning how to run again. He wasn't a clown. He was a hero.

Later that day, as I reflected on that experience, I wondered why I had judged him to be a clown. Why had I assumed that he was making a fool of himself just to get attention? And it dawned on me that it's because that's what I do. I'd always had a high need for attention, and more often than I cared to admit I went to extremes to get that attention. It's something I disliked in myself, something I harshly judged myself for. And so I just projected myself onto that man and judged him as harshly as I judged myself.

Ever done that? Misjudged someone because you projected onto them something you judge in yourself? Or find yourself disliking someone, only to discover that it's because there's something about them that reminds you of something you dislike in yourself? We all have! And it's something that Jesus addresses in today's Gospel reading from Luke 6:37-42. Let's listen to it together:

[Jesus taught the people saying] "Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others,

or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven. Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back."

Then Jesus gave the following illustration: "Can one blind person lead another? Won't they both fall into a ditch? Students are not greater than their teacher. But the student who is fully trained will become like the teacher.

"And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying, 'Friend, let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

"Don't judge others, and you will not be judged." So often when we read those words we assume that it's a warning, or even a subtle threat, a convoluted way of saying, "If you judge other people, God will judge you." But I don't think that's what it means. The very heart of the Gospel is that we are fully loved and freely forgiven. In Romans chapter 8 St. Paul wrote, "*There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" We do not live under God's judgment. We live under God's love. And nothing, not even our judgment of others, will change that.

So, what then does Jesus mean when he says, "Don't judge others, and you will not be judged"? I can't help but wonder if Jesus isn't helping us to make the connection between our tendency to judge others and our tendency to judge ourselves. I've noticed this pattern in others, as well as in myself. Those who judge others, those who are critical and condemning of others may give the appearance that they think they're superior, but if you scratch below the surface, you discover that they tend to be highly critical and judgmental of themselves.

And ultimately I think this is what Jesus is getting at when he says, "*And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying, 'Friend, let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the*

log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye."

On the surface, Jesus is saying that we aren't really equipped to deal with other people's "stuff" when we've got enough "stuff" of our own to deal with. But I think he's also pointing to something deeper too. The goal of spirituality is not to one day become perfect enough to judge others; it's to learn to love and accept ourselves just as we are...which is what God does... trusting and hoping that the Spirit is at work in our lives to keep us growing in Christ-likeness. The log in our eye is more than our individual shortcomings. It's our self-judgment, our unwillingness to embrace the wholeness of who and what we are today. When we learn to love ourselves as God loves us, we are far more likely to love others just as they are.

I knew a pastor years ago who served a very conservative congregation. At least once a month this pastor would find a way to condemn homosexuality in his sermon, declaring that all practicing homosexuals were destined for the fires of hell. And every time I connected with him he would go on and on about our denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, because at that time we were just beginning to allow gay clergy in committed relationships to serve congregations. This pastor was totally fixated on this issue, and irrationally angry about it. I couldn't understand it at the time, but it began to make more sense when I learned that he'd been wrestling with his own sexual identity for years and lived with a deep sense of self-loathing and self-condemnation. I'm not sure how he's doing today, but I pray that he's learned to love himself as much as God loves him.

We all do this. We judge the appearance of others because deep down something about our own appearance bothers us. Or we judge people with lots of money because deep down we judge ourselves for our desire to have more. And it isn't just individuals who do this. The Church, as an institution, has done this over and over again. We've called out and condemned the sins of others while hiding those very same sins in our own lives. We've preached Jesus' words about judgment, but we have too often failed to respond to their deeper calling to love and accept ourselves as God loves and accepts us. We've heard the call to love the Lord with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbor. But we have thought it somehow vain, unchristian even, to

respond to Jesus' call to love ourselves and to forgive ourselves when we fail.

Friends, let me challenge you to live into this message in a couple of specific ways. Maybe you already know what you're beating yourself up about, what you're consistently kicking yourself about. There's nothing wrong with trying to be a better version of yourself, but you can do that while still loving and accepting yourself. The question I would call us to wrestle with is, "Why are you loving yourself less than God loves you?" Maybe it's time to not just pray that God would give you grace to love your neighbor more, but the grace to love yourself more.

And then there's this: The next time you become aware that you are judging someone, whether it's in the moment or in retrospect, pause and ask yourself, "Is what I'm judging something I judge in myself? Is the speck that I see in that person just a piece of a log that I need to deal with in my own life?" And if the answer is yes, then perhaps spend some time in prayer, asking God to give you the grace to love and accept yourself just as you are, trusting that God loves you enough to continue working in you day by day to make you more like Christ.

If you'll do that, you may discover something interesting happening. The very thing you used to judge in others and in yourself, actually becomes a point of compassion and connection. Instead of judging others, you may find yourself drawn to them with a softer heart. Scripture says of Jesus that it was by his wounds that we are healed. Let's trust God enough to use our wounds to heal us and our connection to others in powerful and profound ways. The day we realize that we are all wounded and broken is the day that we embrace the fullness of our common humanity. And isn't that something we need today?

Friends, I still like attention, but I no longer judge myself for that need. I've made peace with it. Which, oddly enough, makes me need less attention! And I dare to believe that if I saw that man running today, I wouldn't need to judge him at all, but would just lace up my shoes and run my own race.

Let's lean into this message now as Jody Slaughter leads us in a time of prayer and self-reflection.