

Letting Go of Judgmentalism, March 27, 2019

Why is it so easy to judge other people? Maybe I feel a little better about my tendency to judge because this was a problem from the beginning of the church. In our Scripture reading (Romans 14), St. Paul is writing to Christians in the city of Rome, which was known for the many gods that were worshiped. One of the customs was to offer animal sacrifices at the shrines, and then the meat was sold to the local butcher. So some Christians would go grocery shopping and say, I will not buy meat that has been sacrificed to a god that I don't believe in.

Other Christians said, That doesn't bother me. I'll take three pounds of it. That god doesn't exist, so it doesn't matter whether or not that meat was sacrificed to an idol. I'm going to eat it anyway. Some Jewish Christians followed the kosher laws, so they wouldn't eat "unclean" meat, or non-kosher meat. And some Christians said, We've been set free from those dietary laws.

And apparently these Christians in the same church quarreled about this with each other. Each of the groups was passing judgment on the other. One group was saying, You shouldn't be eating that meat, it's been sacrificed to idols, and the other group was saying, How immature of you *not* to eat that meat.

So Paul says: Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? In other words, each of you is a servant of Jesus; each of you is accountable to Jesus. A little farther along in the passage he says, Some of you honor one day as a feast day, or you honor a certain day when you will fast. And some of you don't. Don't judge each other for that.

I have been at other churches before for worship, and it's so easy for me to slip into a judgmental attitude. I'm not talking about having an opinion. It's ok to have an opinion. But Paul says not to *quarrel* over an opinion. I know it's judgmental when it feels like it goes *beyond* my opinion to a matter of right and wrong, and my way is right. When I'm in that different worship space, they should be praying *this* way; they should have *different symbols* in the sanctuary. And I realize it's not just that it's different, but that my way is superior. There's a certain smugness about it. Not only is my way superior, but I am superior. Paul says we can go beyond judging each other to despising each other.

So Paul says to me, Who are you, John, to pass judgment on servants of another? Who are you declare somebody's worship style wrong? Who are you to smugly act as if you're way is the only way? I wonder what you get judgmental about? We all do. And I wonder if one reason we so easily pass judgment on others is because we are in such a win/lose culture. We're very binary. Things are right or wrong, good or bad, black or white. So when I see something done in a different way, it's not just different; I judge it as wrong.

It doesn't mean there is no right or wrong. It doesn't mean everything is ok. But it means that about a lot of things there is room, there is spaciousness, there is graciousness.

Paul says the way to deal with this is to let God be the judge. It's very liberating. I don't need to judge people, because God will. Paul says it this way: ¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God. ¹³ Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another.

Our job is to not put a stumbling block in front of each other. Our job is to support each other in our walk with Christ. Our job is to pray for each other.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in *The Cost of Discipleship*. "Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others, we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as ourselves." We cannot love our brother or sister while we are judging them.

How can I move beyond judgment to love? One thought is to pray for that person who we might want to judge. Here's another quote from the German pastor: "I can no longer condemn or hate someone for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble they cause me. Their face that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me is transformed through intercession into the countenance of someone for whom Christ died." It's much harder to judge and condemn someone while we are lifting them up to God's mercy in our prayers.

What if we tried to understand each other rather than judge each other, to listen to each other, to ask: I wonder why they do that the way they do? I wonder what their story is? I wonder what battles they are fighting? What if

we could come from curiosity rather than judgment?

I have spoken often about choosing to think a certain way. We have the ability to monitor our thoughts. St. Paul says this in Philippians 4: Whatever is good and right and honorable and commendable, think about these things. When I slip into judgmentalism, I can choose to be curious. I can choose to find a positive thought about this person. I can choose to give thanks for something about them. I can choose to pray for them.

Mary Oliver has written a poem called *My Work is Loving the World*. If I am busy loving the world, I'll have less time to be judgmental, right? Here is her poem.

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird -
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young and still not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,

Which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

That's not a bad mission statement: my work is loving the world. If I am busy loving the person in front me, I'll have less time and energy to be judgmental. If I am busy loving the world, as God loves the world, I will begin to see each person in front me as a loved child of God, for whom

Christ died. And after all, it's so liberating to just let God be the judge. As someone has said, using courtroom imagery, God doesn't call us to be judges; God calls us to be witnesses to God's amazing love. Amen.