



“The Secret of Life: 7. Beyond Judgment”

Text: Romans 2:1-11

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The story is told of a widowed trapper who lived deep in the Alaskan wilderness with his two year old son. On one occasion, their food supplies had run out and the trapper was forced to go and catch some more food. The weather outside was so fierce he reluctantly decided to leave his son behind, entrusted to the care of his faithful dog. While outdoors the weather had got even more violent and the trapper was forced to take refuge overnight in a stand of trees.

When the trapper returned the next morning, he got to the cabin to find the door open and the furniture overturned. A fierce struggle had taken place. There was no sign of his son and his dog lay in the corner looking at him guiltily, with blood all over his mouth. The trapper was deeply distressed, and quickly determined what had happened. The dog, without food, had turned on his son and killed him. Gathering his axe from his side in a fury the trapper killed his dog.

He then set about searching furiously for some sign of his son. There was still a faint chance his son was alive. As the trapper frantically searched he heard a familiar cry, coming from under the bed. He tipped the bed up to discover his son. He was unharmed, without a scratch or drop of blood upon him. The trapper, flooded with relief, gathered his son in his arms.

When he turned around he saw a dead wolf, lying in the corner of the cabin. Then the trapper realized why his faithful dog had been covered in blood. It was the dog who had saved his son.

Judgment. We're all guilty of passing judgments - sometimes with plenty of evidence or reason - other times without proof or a good reason at all. We're not really sure why we behave this way. Some suggest it is just part of being who we are. Others posit that it is part of our flawed human development. Theologians of every stripe propose it is evidence of our sinfulness.

I'm, frankly, not sure which of those is the case. In fact, I think they all have a part in our judgmental nature. I do know that judging others is a subject that comes up with a certain regularity in the course of scripture.

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.” (Matthew 7:1-5)

Jesus doesn't seem to be pulling any punches there.

Paul doesn't let us off the hook either.

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, “We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.” Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? (Romans 2:1-3)

“For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself.”

Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the New Testament, *The Message*, pushes the point even more, when he gives those verses to us in this way:

Those people are on a dark spiral downward. But if you think that leaves you on the high ground where you can point your finger at others, think again. Every time you criticize someone, you condemn yourself. It takes one to know one. Judgmental criticism of others is a well-known way of escaping detection of your own crimes and misdemeanors. (*The Message*)

Is any of this sounding familiar?

Judging others puts us on a very slippery slope. When we climb onto the judgment seat, we begin a process that can chip away at the image of God in which the other is created. We see the other as “less than” - as “undesirable” - as unworthy of respect.

In his book, *Love Your Enemies*, Arthur C. Brooks, the president of the American Enterprise Institute - certainly no bastion of liberal thought - speaks powerfully about the “culture of contempt” in which we live. He writes,

Social scientists define contempt as anger mixed with disgust. These two emotions form a toxic combination, like ammonia mixed with bleach. In the words of the nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, contempt is “the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another.” Deriving from the Latin word *contemptus*, meaning “scorn,” contempt represents not merely an outburst following a moment of deep frustration with another but rather an enduring attitude of complete disdain.¹

We have stopped disagreeing with each other. We have begun to hold anyone who does not agree with us in contempt - and we are becoming convinced of “the unsullied ... worthlessness of another.”

Think about this. In a January 2017 poll taken by Reuters/Ipsos, it revealed that one in six Americans had stopped talking to a family member or close friend because of the 2016 election. Can you imagine? Maybe you can. Maybe you know someone for whom that is true.

Another study has shown that we now sort our social life along ideological lines, by avoiding places where people disagree with us, choosing and curating our news and social media to weed out the opposing views, and seeking out spaces where we can find the most ideological compatriots.² Because we disagree with someone on this matter or that, we dismiss them as “lesser” than ourselves and hold them and their views in contempt. Our judgment condemns the other - and it ultimately leads to our own self-condemnation. We kill the dog based on incomplete understanding, presumption, and innuendo.

As a result, we are fracturing and shattering the world in which we live. We are growing farther apart from each other. We perpetuate disharmony and we propagate dispute, destroying families, and friendships, and - ultimately - our country and our world. We have apparently given up on that vision of “a more perfect union” of 1787 and opted, instead, for a faction-based, tribal society that labels each other as “contemptible” and “deplorable.” And this is not the way of Christ - the way of life.

How do we change? How do we put away our tendency to judge and think less of our brothers and sisters who see things differently that we see them? How do we begin to heal the open wounds that we ourselves have created?

Again, Paul told the Romans:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:17-18)

Jesus told us to “love one another.” (John 13:34) In the Letter to the Ephesians, we read,

All bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander must be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ. (Ephesians 4:31-32)

We have it within our ability to put away the words of division and discord and work together for the good of all.

We have learned in our interfaith work that our four diverse traditions have far more in common than what divides us. Muslims, Jews, Roman Catholic and Presbyterian Christians, can all work together, play together, share meals together, celebrate together, because we simply refuse to see anyone other than as a person created in the fullness of the image of God. We don't agree on everything, to be sure, but we don't allow our differences to keep us from interaction and friendship. As a result, divisions have been healed, words of kindness and understanding have been spoken, and friendships have been created. This is the way of love - the way of God.

And so it can be in our world. If we can put away that most natural of all human tendencies - to judge another - we can begin to enter into new understanding and discover that we are all people who have opinions and viewpoints and values and morals. We may differ in what those are and how we live them, but that doesn't mean we can't work together on the common ground we most certainly share.

When we move beyond judgment, we begin to see the image of God in which our neighbor was created. We begin to see them as people - fellow human beings - instead of enemies and adversaries. We begin to discover that there are far more things we agree about than what divides us. And when we disagree, we can do so with respect and regard, and not be argumentative and destructive.

When we move beyond judgment, we position ourselves to join with God the Creator in healing the brokenness of the world and its people. When we move beyond judgment, we just might discover life, and peace, and hope, and joy.

Live beyond judgment. For now and evermore. Amen.