

“Who’s Judging”
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Judges 4: 4 – 10

4 At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. 5 She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. 6 She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. 7 I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.’ ” 8 Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” 9 And she said, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. 10 Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.

Luke 6: 37 – 42

37 “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

39 He also told them a parable: “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? 40 A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. 41 Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? 42 Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log 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.

Several years ago I was called for jury duty.

“Ministers are never selected” I was told.

“You’ll never get chosen,” they said.

I told these people that,

while I certainly wasn’t thrilled about the possibility of losing a week of work I considered (consider) Jury duty an honor.

So when I was the last juror selected and immediately elected foreperson,
 it was kind of cool ~ at first.
 And then the actual trial started .

The gentleman before us had been accused of stealing,
 across three days of testimony we heard the evidence against him,
 and his lawyer's attempts to explain it.

The evidence, the story unfolding as it was presented,
 was quite compelling.
 It was the defendant's third strike, and there needed to be a trial.
 We heard the evidence. Considered the evidence.
 I had the responsibility of coming back into that courtroom and declaring the man
 standing in front of me, in front of us, guilty.

And that did not feel like a honor.
 It was hard.
 No matter how true I knew the verdict to be, it was sad.
 This man's life was, due to his own actions, over.

But that was my job, to judge.
 To judge the evidence and ultimately, to judge this man's actions.
 And that's something, judging, that we all do, every day.
 We judge. It's a part of life.

Judging our choices.
 Judging which candidate is going to receive our vote.
 Judging options for how we do our jobs, choices we make for our time.
 Judging the actions of our children in ways that will
 help or hinder their growing up to be faithful and happy.

We're not alone. Jesus judged.
 Should the woman be stoned to death for adultery?
 Did the priest and the Levite men who passed by
 the man who was lying in the middle of the road, suffering, do the right thing?
 Jesus judged that they did not.

There's even a whole section of the Hebrew Bible dedicated to
 the judges who were in charge of ordering society.

One of them was Deborah.
 Theologian Frederick Buechner tells her story with these words:¹
 Deborah was Israel's only woman judge...Her business consisted of more
 than just stepping in and settling things when people got in a wrangle. Like all

¹ Buechner, Frederick, Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who, New York: Harper Collins, 1979, pages 27-28.

the other judges of Israel, she was loaded with charisma, and whenever there was any fighting to be done, she was the one who was in charge. Even generals jumped when she snapped her fingers. Barak, for instance.

She summoned him to the palm tree and told him she wanted him to take ten thousand of his best men and beat the stuffing out of the Canaanite forces under a general named Sisera. Barak said he'd do it but indicated he'd feel more secure if Deborah came along. She said she would. She also said it was only fair to warn him, however, that the main glory of the day was going to be not his but a woman's because a woman was going to be the one to wipe out Sisera. In addition to her other hats, Deborah was also something of a prophet....

Her prediction turned out to be correct, of course....Deborah wrote a song to help spread the word around. It is a wonderful song, full of blood and thunder with a lot of hair-raisingly bitter jibes.... Deborah composed it, but she got Barak to sing it with her....the real hero of Deborah's song is herself. Everything was going to pot, the lyrics say, "until you arose, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel" (5:7), and you can't help feeling that Deborah's basic message was that Mother was the one who really saved the day. And of course, with Yahweh's help, she was.

Judgment is a part of life. And an important one.
 We need to rage against the things that are wrong.
 We need to know when something is good and something is not.
 To make judgements
 so we can work toward that kingdom world God has promised.

To nurture the relationships that will nurture yourself and nurture the world.

Those Nina Simone words I've shared before,
 "You've got to learn to leave the table when love's no longer being served."
 How do you know when love is no longer being served? Judgement.
 How do you know when it's you that's kept love off of the table? Judgement.

So what do we do, then, with the words of Jesus, that say,
 as a part of his sermon on the mount,
 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged."

There are a couple of things about this phrase.
 One of them is noticing the context.
 Judgement is not singled out, it is a part of a progression
 that explains the golden rule in a more expansive way.

Pastor Brian Stoffregren explains it in this way:²
 The main verbs in this section are present tense imperatives. These carry the idea of continuous or repeated actions. Thus we can understand the prohibitions as:

² <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke6x27.htm>

"Don't continue to judge" (or "Don't keep on judging"). "Don't continue to condemn." We can understand the positive commands the same way, "Keep on forgiving." "Continue to give."....this section goes back to the Golden Rule. We are to treat others as we want them to treat us -- and they will treat us that way. When we are forgiving and giving (rather than judging and condemning), others will treat us in the same way.

But that's not all that's being referenced here.

There is also referring to the larger understanding of judgement.

The judgement of God.

The judgement at the end of days.

The judgement when the one who created us looks at our life and our actions.

And in that realm, we are **absolutely not** to judge.

Time and again the Bible tells that God will be the one making those judgements.

That there are people and places which are God's about which we do not know.

There is mercy we cannot fully comprehend.

And that we cannot be the ones to stand in for God.

No where. No place. No time.

And that means that no matter how much we might want to agree when someone proclaims something about a special place in hell for someone who... (and you can fill in the blank).

That's not ours to know.

Nor if you have family members or loved ones who don't live in faith in the way you believe to be true. That's not ours to know, either.

And it's not just what we learn in the Bible. It's a core principle of reformed theology.

In many places in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin writes that it is not our place to know or think we know who God saves and who has chosen to not be saved, and that we must treat all people as if they are God's most chosen elect. He writes it in many places, and most succinctly in Volume 4: ". . . we are not bidden to distinguish between reprobate and elect – that is for God alone, not for us, to do . . ." ³

"Judge not" writes Jean Bethke, "is, then, not an injunction to spineless acceptance but a caution against peremptory legalisms that leave no space for acts of compassion and witness." ⁴

I recently read the story of Pastor Mark Owen Fenstermacher ⁵, about when he was sent to serve a church in central North Carolina. He writes:

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV. 1. 3.

⁴ Elshain, Jean Bethke. "Judge Not." *First Things* 46, (October 1994): 36-40. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed July 14, 2018).

⁵ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-06/mistake>

The denominational official who sent me out... neglected to mention that the church had been torn apart by conflict. About half the members had left. All of 25 years old, I had no idea how to handle the kind of pain I discovered in that congregation. I preached my best. I visited folks in their homes. I visited people who stayed in the church and those who had left. I loved the people who told me I talked funny and looked like a little Yankee soldier in my blue suit coat, and I found grace in the middle of the Piedmont.

Then the anonymous notes and phone calls began. They were never directly threatening, but they were unsettling. Someone who knew me very well and was a part of the congregation was writing the letters. On the phone calls, someone would stay on the line, saying nothing.

I prayed. I studied the letters and looked for a pattern. At one point I decided that the source had to be the wife of one of the farmers in the congregation. During the conflict in the church, her husband had stopped attending worship, but Betty and her three adolescent children continued to come. She and one daughter taught a Sunday school class. The family lived in a simple, white frame farmhouse at the end of a gravel road. Making ends meet for them was, I thought, a struggle.

I called Betty and asked if I could come visit. It was a warm, summer day when I knocked on the back door of the farmhouse. We sat at her kitchen table. We made small talk for a few minutes, and then I told Betty that I knew she had been making the anonymous phone calls and writing the letters.

There are times when you suddenly see something you have missed. As the words came out of my mouth, I suddenly saw another piece of the puzzle that made it impossible for Betty to have been the caller and the letter writer. But the words had been spoken, and they sat there on the kitchen table between us. I braced myself for a storm to break over my head. I waited for Betty to promise that she and her family would never again darken the doors of a church with such a foolish young pastor.

There was no storm. Betty looked at me across the table, and I saw disappointment in her eyes. "No, pastor," she said quietly, "I didn't make those phone calls or write those letters."

I can't remember if I said anything. All I remember is sitting there in the quiet of her kitchen. Then Betty said, "Pastor, would you like some sweet tea?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. Betty poured me a glass of sweet tea. I remember the sound of the ice cubes falling into the glass. Betty sat there with me, and we drank tea. We talked about the family, the farm, weather, and the church. When the tea was gone, she let me pray. She walked me to the door, shook my hand, and said she would see me on Sunday.

Now when I think of grace I always think of sweet tea, the way the disciples must have associated grace with bread and fish, remembering the morning the risen Christ served them breakfast on the beach even though they had all slipped away when he needed them most. Sweet tea reminds me of the afternoon when grace came to me unexpectedly and a saint held onto me despite my foolishness.

Judge not does not mean we are unable to distinguish right from wrong,
from the obvious rights and wrongs, stealing- lying-
to the less pin-down-able things- like choices about time and generosity.

But judge not also means seeing others with the eyes of God, who serves sweet tea and shows
up again the next Sunday.

Thanks be to God for this our God.
Amen.