

***“Judge Not’...Really? But It’s So Fun!”***

Matthew 7:1-5 Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Pastor Bill Chadwick July 23, 2017

She had such a gentle voice and lovely face. I had recently come to that particular congregation as pastor, and Marian was one of the key leaders of the church. A few years older than I, married, with four lovely children. I immediately took a liking to her.

But I proposed a modification to our wedding policy, which she adamantly opposed. Following my Christmas Eve sermon, on which many people had commented positively, she responded, “I didn’t like it *at all!*” I was a bit hurt, but I had to admire her brutal honesty.

Now, I make mistakes on a regular basis. And it’s certainly all right to disagree with me. And it’s perfectly legitimate to not appreciate a particular sermon. Heck, even *I* don’t like some of my sermons, thinking, “Boy, I hope the music is good today.” But soon it seemed that Marian had a knee-jerk reaction to anything and everything I said or did: If I was for it, Marian was agin’ it.

I commented to Kris, “I feel like if I said, ‘The sun rises in the east,’ that she would say, ‘No, it doesn’t. It rises in the north.’”

I couldn’t figure it out. I had not run into anything quite like this in my dozen years in ministry. I forced myself to act normally toward Marian, but I will admit I did not like her any more. At all.

We’ll leave Marian there and come back to her later.

Our gospel lesson today comes from Jesus’ sermon on the Mount, the very heart of his teaching. Matthew 7:1-5 *“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. <sup>2</sup> For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. <sup>3</sup> Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> 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? <sup>5</sup> 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.*

I can be pretty judgmental. It's kind of my default mode, so that over the years of trying to follow Jesus it's been a sin I have had to confess any number of times and ask for God's continuing help.

"Judge not, that you be not judged." How many of you learned that as a kid? And I remember arguing with Jesus in my head about that passage. (Know that more than once when I was a child my mother commented, "I'll bet you will be a lawyer when you grow up. You argue about everything.") My argument was that we have to make judgments. For the protection of society we judge murderers and put them behind bars. When you are hiring an employee you make a judgment as to which candidate is the best.

Yes, we do need to make judgments. Later in Matthew Jesus commands us to confront a fellow Christian caught in a sin (Matthew 18:15-17). His point here in chapter 7 is not to judge hypocritically. And to extend to others the same grace we usually give ourselves. We know what's going on in our own lives that sometimes causes us to act in ways that are less than our best. "Well, I was already upset about this thing..." or "I was really worried about my kid so I snapped..." Let's not rush to judgment of others until we have walked a mile in their moccasins.

Back to Marian, the thorn in my side, who was making my ministry miserable at every opportunity. After a few years of this, Marian and her family stopped coming to church. As you can imagine, this was a relief. But it was also a sadness for me, a disappointment that we weren't able to work through our differences.

But some time later I discovered two things about Marian. I learned that her mother had suffered greatly from mental illness, which had, of course, significantly colored Marian's childhood. In fact, her mother had committed suicide on Marian's 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. I also learned that during the time that Marian had been making my life miserable there were significant, horribly painful issues going on inside the family.

My knowledge of the really heavy stuff that had been going on inside Marian's life completely changed my attitude toward her and her treatment of me. I thought,

“Well, that wasn’t any fun, but I’d much rather have her take it out on me than on her kids.” It really helps to know the whole story.

Because of my natural propensity toward judgmentalism I have worked hard to try understand people whose actions seem nutso butso to me.

But let me share stories of other people. A few years ago following the shooting and subsequent protests in Ferguson, Missouri, Oak Grove put on a panel discussion about race. Oak Grove member, Bill Cross, an African-American man who has been on the receiving end of seven decades of institutional racism, was asked about his opinion of the Ferguson situation. He responded, “Well, I wasn’t there so I can’t make a judgment on that.” He was more gracious than many of us.

Second story. I was having lunch a while back with a relative of mine who is pretty far on the conservative side of both politics and religion. I was pleasantly surprised when he told me he listens to two radio stations: AM 1130 (way on the right) and 950 (way on the left). He said, “I think we have to listen to both sides if we are going to be informed.” I SOOO admire that. (Personally, I can’t listen to political talk radio, even the ones I agree with politically, because the hosts are so snarky and mean.)

Third. A couple years ago I sat down to breakfast with Doug Kelley’s son, Brett, who had recently served in the military in Afghanistan. It was fascinating. Among many things we talked about vocational opportunities for Afghan men. He told me this. If you are a farmer you can make ten times as much money growing poppies for opium as you can growing vegetables, not surprising. Also, If you are the son of a farmer in Afghanistan but you are not the oldest son, the one who will inherit the land, you essentially have three choices of employment. You can join the police, the military, or the Taliban. One of those provides you with both the smallest chance of getting killed and you get paid the most money. Which one? The Taliban. It helps to know the whole story.

Have you ever read about the childhoods of mass murderers, the Saddam Husseins and Osama bin Ladens of the world? Do you know about the psychic damage inflicted on their spirits? Not that it’s okay then to murder, but it’s *understandable* given their personal woundedness.

In this past presidential election we experienced a new phenomenon in our country's history. We have such polarization that it was reported that a fairly high percentage of people do not have any friends who voted for the candidate they opposed. That's a new thing. It's important for all of us to try to understand one another. For those trying to understand Tea Party supporters I recommend a couple of books, written *before* the election: *Strangers in their Own Land* by Arlie Russell Hochschild and especially *The Unwinding* by George Packer.

Finally, one more story. Let me share a rare story of mine in which I look good, thanks to hard-won knowledge and experience.

Eleven years ago our kids were mostly teenagers, we had a big yard, and Kris, Andy, Allie and Anji conspired together and decided that the time had come to get a puppy. Knowing how much work dogs are, and who would be doing the work, and how many thousands of dollars they cost, I said, "Over my dead body! We are NOT getting a dog. A dog moves into this house, I'm moving out."

And they said, "We'll miss you."

Soon Eddie joined the household, a mixed-breed rescue dog whom we were told would grow to 25-35 pounds. Hah! 52 pounds. Despite investing oodles of dollars in training for both Eddie and the family, Eddie never got very well-behaved. We still haven't figured out if he's really dumb or way smarter than we are. Eddie doesn't even like people very much, but he loves other dogs.

Until one day, when he was about two or three years old, my spouse Kris was walking Eddie when a large black and brown dog attacked him. Kris and the other dog's owner ultimately were able to separate the two. Eddie was not badly hurt, but he was traumatized. And he became a racist. He still loves all dogs...*except* large black and brown dogs. To this day he goes berserk with barking and straining at the leash whenever he spots one.

Not long after that, one winter day Kris had taken Eddie on a leash out to the front yard to do his business in the snow. Around the corner of the street came a young man walking his dog. A black and brown dog. It was not the same dog that had attacked Eddie, but it was big and black and brown. Eddie immediately started barking and growling and lunging toward the dog and pulled the leash free from

Kris's grip. In three bounds Eddie was on this other dog in a frenzy of barking and biting, snarling and snapping. The other dog was equally ferocious.

My wife stood where she was, frozen in horror, and then commanded in her loudest and firmest voice, "Eddie, come! Eddie! Come!!" That was no more likely to be obeyed than if she had commanded, "Eddie, stand up and say the Pledge of Allegiance!" The young man was also yelling, pulling on his own dog's leash and kicking at Eddie.

Seeing all this through the living room window I raced outside in my bare feet and was able to grab Eddie's leash, and between the herculean efforts of the other owner and me we separated the two dogs. It was clear that neither was hurt.

As I dragged Eddie toward our house I said, "I'm so, so sorry."

Before I could explain why Eddie hated and feared black and brown dogs, the young man yelled, "You G—D---- liberals! I oughta shoot that #%\$# dog like they do in Iraq!" Kris and I stood in stunned silence as he hurried down the street. (The "liberals" comment no doubt stemmed from the campaign signs we sometimes had in our yard and the "PEACE" sign permanently in our front window.)

That night around the supper table we shared with our three then-teenaged children what had happened that afternoon. They were outraged and expressed their own loathing toward the owner of the other dog. I said, "Well, I could have done without the profanity and name-calling, but it *was our* fault. The guy was scared! He was just out for a stroll with his dog when Eddie attacked with full fury! It was *frightening*."

"Besides," I added, thinking back to my experience with Marian and others, "we don't know what kind of day he was already having."

They were unconvinced, and cut him no slack.

A couple months later I was walking Eddie through the neighborhood when around a curve I could see walking toward us the same young man walking his black and brown dog. My first impulse was to turn around and get Eddie out of there, but I decided I would once again apologize and explain why Eddie had acted the way he

did. As we got closer the two dogs, of course, started barking and pulling toward each other, but both the young man and I held firm. I called out across the street, “Hey, again, I’m so sorry for Eddie attacking your dog.” As I was continuing, “The problem is he was attacked by a black and brown dog and now he’s afraid of all of them,” the young man was simultaneously saying, “No, *I* apologize. I shouldn’t have said that. My mom says that Eddie is a good dog. I just lost my temper. That morning I had gotten word that my buddy had been killed in Iraq.”

All behavior is understandable when we know the whole story.

I think that’s why God is so good at this forgiveness business.

God knows the whole story.

