

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

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Matthew 7:1–5, 12

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Over the last several weeks, we have explored sections of Jesus’ sermon on the mount and conclude this week. This last section of his sermon is a grouping of sayings and teachings. Nuggets of wisdom and advice. Similar to proverbs. From the seventh chapter of Matthew, verses 1–5, 7–12. Listen for a word from God.

“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.

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those

who ask him! “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

As I mentioned, this last section of Jesus’ sermon is like a series of sayings and as such, I have often heard sermons on each of the different passages, but not often in larger sections. For example, from the reading just now, I have heard or delivered a sermon on “judge not, so that you may not be judged,” and one or more on “Ask, seek, and knock,” and more than a few on the Golden Rule or, “treat others the way you want to be treated.”

Last year, in the summer, we looked at the part of the passage, “judge not, so that you may not be judged,” as part of the sermon series on those passages that we often hear, but may or may not be in the bible, or that are often misunderstood. Most often we hear someone quote, or I should say misquote, this part of the sermon on the mount when they don’t think they should be judged by someone. As in, “who are you to judge me?” We, of course, need to make judgements in our life all the time – some large, some small – what to eat, what to wear, where to go to college, what job to pursue, how to spend our time and our money. It is a good thing to have a discerning will in order to make sound judgements.

But Jesus also recognizes that we make judgement of others, and this is where we should exercise some caution. We first, need to make sure our own house and life are in order so that we are not hypocritical. And it is helpful to be in relationship as we seek to correct or make judgments of others. In addition, the verb in the original Greek that is translated as “judge” is probably closer to “condemn.” So, we should be careful before we judge someone too harshly that we attempt to put them outside of God’s grace and mercy.

Judgment allows us to understand what is good. It allows us to seek and ask for forgiveness when we don't live up to that good. And that requires that we are sufficiently introspective and honest about how we ourselves are doing before we approach someone else in judgment.

It is this framework that Jesus gives us before he invites us to search, to seek, to ask questions. If we have attended to our own faith journey, if we are approaching it in an honest and humble way, we should also be open to having an inquisitive mind, a questioning spirit.

From the time we are young, we are asking questions of the world around us. Who or what are you? Does that person like me? Why are you different? If you have ever spent time with a verbal toddler, you will eventually hear questions like, why is the sky blue? Why aren't there dinosaurs anymore? Why are there so many languages? Why do people get sick? Why do you sometimes cry when you are happy? Why do I invite them to my party?

When I was young, my questions didn't usually start with "why?" they usually started with "what if?" I would wonder about possibilities. What if we won a million dollars? What if we didn't have to sleep? What if we could time travel?

Questions are the best way to gain insight and develop new ideas and imagine new possibilities. Children learn by asking questions. We all learn by asking questions.

As I grew up, my questions expanded. I continued to ask what if? And why? But also, how? Who? For whom? But what about?

In high school I began to sense a call and thought about entering ministry, but because of a host of questions and some negative experiences, I did not pursue this option at the time.

In my mid-twenties, I began again to wonder about a call into ministry. I had been away from the church for a while, and I sought a place where I was welcome. I found a wonderful church community, where my questions were welcome.

I began reading scripture again more regularly, and one piece of scripture that stuck with me, was the part of the passage from today that encourages us to “ask, search, knock.” I entered seminary and I got to ask a lot of questions, some of which I had never ever considered to ask before.

Mostly it was wonderful, sometimes it was troubling or frustrating. But I began to become more comfortable with questions, and I began to see that a lot of good can come from asking honest questions.

Somewhere, some of us got this idea that if we are faithful, we shouldn't ask so many questions. Some people are afraid that by asking questions they will look weak, ignorant or unsure. They like to give the impression that they are decisive and in command of the relevant issues. They fear that asking questions might introduce uncertainty or show them in a poor light. We end up judging ourselves too harshly. In fact, I believe asking questions is a sign of strength and intelligence, not a sign of weakness or uncertainty. God can certainly handle our questions, even if sometimes God's followers can't.

When you ask questions, it means your learning is never complete. It means you want to know more. The motto “faith seeking understanding” is considered one of the classical definitions of theology. “Faith seeking understanding” means that faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ prompts a questioning search for deeper understanding.

Scripture promotes the idea of faith seeking understanding. Later in the book of Matthew, Jesus will teach that the greatest commandment instructs us to love God with all our *minds* (Matthew 22:37).

This approach to faith is about recognizing, just as our questions change as we age, so our faith deepens and matures as we ask questions, as we learn more, as spend time in self-reflection and honest examination. This is part of the life of rigorous discipleship that Jesus calls us to continually in the sermon on the mount. It is to a set of practices and an embodied faith of action. The Christian faith is (or should be) primarily a way of life rather than a system of beliefs. Christianity as a system of beliefs focuses on a list of doctrines. Legitimacy is proven not by life, not by heart, not by action, but by correctness or conformity. Rather, Jesus again and again tells us that our faith and beliefs need to fuel our actions.

Writer and theologian Brian McLaren has written extensively about the difficulties and problems of a Christian faith centered in a belief system instead of a way of life where one's belief informs their actions. He has said that this belief-system Christianity has a mixed history "in which colonialism, racism, environmental destruction, scapegoating, religious violence, and marginalization are not marginal [and] we have good reason, if not a moral summons, to consider a conversion that places a Christ-like way of life in the center. That way of life is characterized positively by love and a constellation of related words: compassion, nonviolence, shalom, reconciliation, and peacemaking."ⁱ

That constellation of words ultimately is about a way of life that is directed in loving, compassionate, non-violent ways toward others. Toward the end of Jesus' sermon, he encapsulates the entire thing by giving us the Golden Rule, "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." The entire

sermon on the mount is a call to discipleship that envisions ethical and moral interactions. “Those interactions are to be marked by mutuality, love and justice, and not domination and enforced deference typical of many interactions in a hierarchical, competitive society.”ⁱⁱ This Golden Rule is another reiteration and framing of the law and prophets that Jesus says are the greatest, that is, to love God with our whole heart, mind, and soul, and a second like it, to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is to be our orientation in our life of faith.

Taken together, all of these parts of Jesus sermon speak to self-awareness and self-correction, being open to asking questions to deepen our faith, and to seek out ways to love our neighbors.

Some of you may be familiar with the writer Rainer Maria Rilke. He was a poet from the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. His most often quoted line is from his “Letters to a Young poet,” and starts with “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves,” and ends with “Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” But he has another quote that I find helpful, when he writes, “Your doubt may become a good quality if you *train* it. It must become *knowing*, it must become critical. Ask it, whenever it wants to spoil something for you, *why* something is ugly, demand proofs from it, test it, and you will find it perplexed and embarrassed perhaps, or perhaps rebellious. But don’t give in, insist on arguments and act this way, watchful and consistent, every single time, and the day will arrive when from a destroyer it will become one of your best workers, perhaps the cleverest of all that are building at your life.”

To be a part of God's work, to be about helping the world be a better place, to treat our neighbors well and be a good neighbor, requires honest self-reflection and self-correction, requires questions, requires searching, requires a faith seeking understanding.

While a lot of this work can be done on an individual level, it also is important for us to do it on a congregational level. It is important that we spend time in self-reflection and self-correction at a corporate level, at a congregational level. In the same way, it is important and necessary for us to ask questions and seek understanding at a congregational level. This work, then helps us know who our neighbors are and how we can be good neighbors. These activities of faith help us make our corner of the world here in Bloomington and in the greater Twin Cities a better place. What then does this look like at a congregational level?

Well, we can have honest conversations about our past and examine where we have done well and where we have caused harm. We can look at ways we have contributed to the ills of the world, where we have been hypocritical or judgmental and then continue to take actions to provide true reconciliation from the wounds of those times. We can also look at those times when we have failed to act and make commitments to reinvigorate and engage in the work justice and love of neighbor.

We can ask questions. A lot of questions.

Things like:

- What is God doing around us, and how can we help?
- Who exactly is our neighbor? Who are we?
- What should this church be about?
- What are our values?
- How can we be more inclusive?

- In what ways do we think we are welcoming, but we maybe aren't?
- What does it mean to be a Matthew 25 church? How are we actively being an anti-racist congregation and in what ways are we working to dismantle structural racism? In what ways are we called to work to eradicate the underlying conditions and causes of poverty?
- What challenges are the people in our neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces facing? What are the things that might have caused these problems?
- What can we do to help with these problems?
- What do we need to learn to become more knowledgeable about the things we don't know?

We can ask, “Why?” “What if?” “What about?”

It is my hope and expectation later this year that we will begin, as a congregation, to engage in this very work. To enter into an intentional time of discernment and questioning.

The last couple of years has had so much uncertainty, so much shifting and pivoting, so much disruption. We have had to do things in new ways, and then figure out a new way from the new way. We have missed traditions and rituals. Some of this disruption has led to new creativity and a re-ordering of our lives. It will still, I believe, take some time for things to settle out, for us to know the shape of things. However, I think we are beginning to turn a corner and I anticipate being able to come back to some old patterns and practices in the next few months.

And as we do so, I also think it is a good time to ask some questions. To spend some time in discernment to answer, “Who are we?”, “Who is our neighbor?” and “What is God calling us to be and do in our future together?”

Spending time in learning who we are is about our identity, about what makes us unique and what values undergird what we are about.

Knowing where we have come from and who we are currently allows for clear and purposeful decisions to move us into this new future.

Spending time understanding who our neighbor is, is about our context, where we live in time and space. It's a geographical, cultural, and theological question. Knowing our context and our neighbors informs how we engage in the world.

And spending time discerning where God is calling us into the future is about our purpose and mission. God is active in the world and calls us out into the world to join God in particular service to the world.

We will do this work so that we can do unto others as we would have them do to us. So that we can, as I said last week, to the best of our abilities, do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Amen.

ⁱ Brian McLaren, <https://www.patheos.com/topics/future-of-faith-in-america/progressive/a-desirable-future-for-progressive-faith-brian-mclaren-07-29-2015>

ⁱⁱ Warren Carter, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/the-golden-rule/commentary-on-matthew-71-14-24-29>