

I'll Do the Judging

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

One of my professors was once at a conference and he decided to use some of his free time to drive outside of town and clear his head. He saw an old cemetery next to a little country church. He decided to get out and walk around it. I know, it may seem strange to you, but if you've been a pastor for very long, you've been to a bunch of cemeteries and you stop feeling less creeped out by them and more fascinated by them.

He wanted to see how old the gravestones were. He walked over to one section of the cemetery and there he sees a long row of gravestones. In this cemetery, for some reason, many of these graves had full length stone slabs that covered the graves. This made it all the more noticeable when he looked down that row and came to a grave stone that had been turned crosswise. It was turned so that it took up three plots. Why would anyone do that?

Suddenly he became aware that there was another man in the cemetery, nearby. They guy came over and said to him, "You are wondering about why that gravestone is turned sideways, aren't you?"

"Well, yes. The thought did occur to me."

The guy said, "I knew that guy." He went to church with the rest of us. I knew him well all my life."

My professor asked, "So why did they place his gravestone like that?"

The guy said, "Because the family wanted it that way and the church agreed."

My professor asked, "But why?"

The guy said, "Because that was the kind of guy he was. He was crossways with everybody and everything. We never knew him to be pleased about anything at home or at church. He had a negative judgment about everything and everyone. Why did the church do that? Was a stupid decision, that one. The family decided they wouldn't try to change him just because he was dead. If he was crosswise in life, he might as well be crosswise in death."

My professor said, "What an awful thing to do."

But the man said, "The family figured that if God wants to straighten him out, then God can straighten him out. But he left here just like he lived."

This story about judging came to mind when I was studying our scripture for today. To tell you the truth, I was more than a bit overwhelmed by how many wonderful verses our scriptures have given us. My goodness, I was like a kid in a candy store who cannot decide which piece I am going to choose. They are all so inviting and I could serve up about a dozen sermons from these verses. Don't worry, I am not preaching them all. I've narrowed it down to one verse to focus on:

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone.

(In so far it is up to you,) get along with everybody.

Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do.

"I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it." (Adapted Message Bible)

I am quite sure that the Apostle Paul wrote these words not only for the benefit of his churches, but also for his own benefit. The Apostle Paul would have known people like that man buried crosswise in the cemetery. There were always people in his churches who were always quarreling and criticizing. One group or another was always judging and putting down another group. One group thought they were right and the others who saw it differently were wrong. Paul served many churches and some of them were divided from each other. He was always doing his best to bring them together.

I know one thing: it is very easy to become judgmental, to believe that your way of seeing the world is the correct way of seeing the world. People say that today our nation is more divided than ever before. I am not sure that is the case. We were very divided back in the 1960's. We were literally divided during the Civil War. But it is true, we do seem to be divided in our tribes, our clans, and find it difficult to imagine that we can ever find commonality with those who think differently than ourselves. We are not even sure we can hear what the other side has to say. People are so gathered around the tribally ordained news media, where more times than not they have reconfirmed what they already believe. Very little is communicated which might bring us closer to one another.

The Apostle Paul has something to say about this: *"Be not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewal of our minds."* As the Message Bible says, *"Don't be so well-adjusted that you fit in the culture without even thinking. Instead fix your attention on God; you will be changed from the inside out. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you."* Perhaps the news we need to pay most attention to is not the bad news of our culture, but the Good News of our faith.

I remember when I was a young person and my folks made me go to church every Sunday. We had to sit through worship, which I thought was the longest, most boring thing my parents told me that I had to do all week long. The only redeeming part of going to church, besides the snacks after worship, was that the church in Batesville had a balcony that arched around above where my parents sat. All the youth would go up there and sit together, out of sight of our parents. While the preachers were going on about the gifts of the spirit, we'd be focused on entertaining each other while doing our best not to make too much noise. One Sunday, my friend Scott, whose dad was the pastor, and I quietly constructed paper planes from the bulletin.

Scott made a perfect one and put it right on the ledge for the rest of us to admire. While we were doing so the air conditioner in the balcony of that church kicked on. And a blast of wind set that paper airplane on its maiden and final voyage. It flew out above the congregation and took a sudden dive right into the hairdo of one of the older women in church who wore her hair up in a big bonnet. Scott's dad immediately stopped the sermon and said out loud to his son, "Scott, we will have a lot to talk about after church." Well that was one time I actually understood what my pastor had to say.

But things change. We get older, and hopefully more mature. At some point in my life, I started paying attention and even, at times, looking forward to what would come out of the mouth of the pastor. When you go to worship week after week and year after year, something of that experience starts to flow through your veins. It changes you, and you are not the same and you probably have little idea that you are being shaped in a new way. Over time, the Gospel has a way of shaping our hearts, minds, and commitments. Worship can be dangerous if you don't want to change, because it is highly likely overtime to shape and form you. The Good News, when taken to heart, transforms us from the inside out.

Another thing starts to happen when we take in in the Good News: we become passionate about what we believe. We start to develop deep commitments that we take very seriously.

- I am deeply convicted that the magnificence of creation is a gift from God for which we have an obligation to revere and take care of. When I am hiking up in the mountains near Beaver Creek and I see where someone has just tossed out a sack of fast-food, I am upset by it. When I hear the EPA is opening up drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Preserves, I am beside myself. This is God's creation you are messing with. That is a gospel value for me. I think it terribly wrong.
- Immigration is an issue with many complexities. But there is nothing complex in my mind about carelessly ripping apart children from their parents as a means of discouraging people from applying for asylum in our country. It is an affront to God and to everything I believe. I am angered that one penny of my tax money goes to support that.

Sometimes our conceptions are deep and rightfully so. But there is a danger that we may find ourselves caught up in the rage and immaturity of this world in how we think and treat people we so strongly disagree with. When we only want to hit back and not see the beauty in everyone, then the world has dragged us down to its level of immaturity.

A fellow pastor was asked to come speak at a church for a couple of days. A woman came very late for one of the services with her noisy kids and distracted everyone in the service. It even bothered the fellow pastor who can tolerate a lot. At the fellowship time afterward, that woman came up to him and said, "You don't know me; I am the one with the noisy kids." He said, "Yes, I noticed when you came in to worship." And they talked a bit.

The next night she came back without the kids. After the coffee hour, there she was again. She said, "Remember me from last night?" He said, "Yes...You are the one with the noisy kids." She said, "I didn't bring them tonight. I take my noisy kids and go late when I don't want something to get to me. Tonight I came without them." Did she want to be affected by the Good News? No? Yes? No? Yes? And then she said, "You won't believe what a mess I've made with my life." Was she open to the Good News? "Yes?"ⁱⁱⁱ

How easy is it for us to judge people whose beliefs and behaviors go against what we feel passionate about, like a woman who rudely interrupts what is a sacred time for many people. We may never agree with each other and may disagree passionately. But we are not to hit back; we are not to take part in the immaturity of this world. We are to discover the beauty and humanity that is everyone. We are all ultimately in this world together and must find a way to live with and honor each other. Amen.

ⁱ Fred B Craddock, The Cherry Log Sermons, "Who Am I to Judge Another?", p. 71-72.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 77.