

June 13, 2021
Matthew 7:1-5

"Judge Not"

John Wesley United Methodist Church
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I want to start today with a little quiz of sorts. One of basics of our Christian faith is the Ten Commandments, right? So who wants to volunteer to come up here and recite them all for us? No one? Okay, I'll review them for you just in case you've forgotten any. Here's the simplified version. 1 – There is only one God. (And you're not him.) 2 – You shall not worship any other gods. (This includes sport stars, politicians, celebrities, money.) 3 – You shall not take God's name in vain. (Golfers, please note.) 4 – You shall remember the Sabbath day. (Soccer moms, please note.) 5 – You shall honor your father and mother. 6 – You shall not commit murder. 7 – You shall not commit adultery. 8 – You shall not steal. 9 – You shall not lie. 10 – You shall not covet.

Now the truth is, just those very basic ten commandments are difficult enough for us to keep. But did you know that the Jewish Old Testament Scriptures contain a total of 613 commandments? That's right, 613, ranging from believing in only the one God, to things like not shaving your beard or eating green corn. Some of those commandments were so tedious that both the apostles Peter and Paul spoke out against them at various times. Peter said, “Now therefore why are you placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?” And Paul said, “When I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law – I stopped trying to meet all its requirements, so that I might live for God.” That's why I think Jesus made it so beautifully simple for us. By telling us that the whole intent of all the laws can be summarized as follows: first, love the Lord God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength; and second, love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Loving God and loving your neighbor. On the surface, this sounds rather uncomplicated. I mean, if you love God you want to worship him, to please him in every way. Likewise, if you love your neighbor, you're not going to steal from him or hurt her in any way. But sometimes it's not our actions toward others that's the problem - and this is important - it's what we think about others that's the problem, it's our attitude toward them. That's why I chose today's scripture about judging others. Because being judgmental is something we often do from afar, keeping our offense at arm's length so to speak. Yet being judgmental is something that is so fundamentally incompatible with authentic Christian faith and behavior. Jesus was pretty adamant about that. You see, being judgmental creates a line in the sand of

sorts. It says I'm superior to you. I live a better life, I know better than you, I am better than you. It does not say "I love you." Now speaking of sand, on my just completed trip to Florida, I'll give you an example of just what I'm talking about. There was a man with a megaphone on the beach, a self-styled evangelist of sorts. He didn't identify himself with any official religious denomination. But there he was literally judging – making lifestyle assumptions and accusations against every person who passed him by. Well, he got into a heated discussion with one young lady that made me very uncomfortable. And when I pulled her away from him there were tears in her eyes. I told her I was a Methodist pastor and that the God he was preaching was not the God we know and worship. After a few minutes she calmed down and felt better. And I very much hope that she felt loved.

Because Jesus said his disciples should be known for how deeply we love one another. How deeply we love one another! Yet in the eyes of so many out there, “Christians” are known for how deeply we judge or condemn, not for how deeply we love. And the fact is, very few people get judged and then change their behavior. But many people get loved into changing their behavior. So, given all this, I have a question for everyone. Have you judged anyone lately? Think about it. Have you judged anyone lately? Regretfully, the answer for most of us, is probably, yes. Because it's so easy to judge. But if this kind of thinking is left unchecked, it can only get worse, in that being judgmental creates a divide and can eventually lead to things like racism, sexism, phobias and “isms” of all kinds. Something Reverend Bob said last week resonated with me. How watching Fox news, and I'm also going to add CNN and other news outlets, caused him, and me I will say, to not sleep very well. Because so much of their “reporting” is actually judging – criticizing, accusing, condemning. And so, by not watching, perhaps we would all not only sleep better, but our whole attitude toward other people could change for the better.

As I was preparing for today's sermon, I came across a short story by Margaret Silf which I think puts the issue of judging others into perspective. I've used my pastoral license to edit some of her text, but let me read for you. *The day started off very early, awakened by the crowing of a rooster from the farm down the road. I went to the window, had a good stretch, took a deep breath of fresh morning air, and looked out. Now, I had been keeping a watchful eye on the goings-on across the street for quite a while. She was up to no good, that one. Not long married and her husband away. Who knows what she's up to? Not that it's any business of mine, of course, but we all have a responsibility to do what we can to keep up our standards. One rotten apple, and soon the whole crate goes off. Anyway that morning my*

suspensions were confirmed. As I stood there behind the curtains, I saw her door open, and I watched, aghast, as this young man slunk off down the street. Now what, I ask you, is a young man like that doing sneaking out of a young married woman's house at that hour in the morning? I wasted no more time. I called a few of my equally virtuous friends, and we went over there straight away, and together we hauled her out into the street. Just as she was, in her flimsy nightgown. We didn't stop to ask questions. We dragged her, kicking and screaming to the court, and delivered her to the official guardians of morality. We all knew what would happen. She would be stoned to death. Our law demanded that. By now quite a crowd was gathered to see what all the commotion was about. The religious authorities were there, but so was this other fellow. This Jesus. Why they didn't just get on with the job themselves, instead of involving him I'll never know. They had already decided to have her stoned, but for no apparent reason they dragged her over to where Jesus was sitting, and put the question to him. "This woman has been caught in the very act of adultery. Our laws say that she must be stoned to death. What do you say?" Well, what did he say? Nothing at all. What kind of answer was that? For what seemed like ages, he just sat there doodling with a stick in the sand. Everyone held their breath. What was coming? The woman cringed on the ground, as well she might. Some people were already choosing stones to hurl at her. There wasn't a stone big enough for my satisfaction. People like her need flogging right off the face of the earth. I almost missed the moment when he finally looked up and gazed at all of us, calmly saying, "I suggest that those among you who have never done anything wrong, or never made a mistake, or never hurt someone in one way or another, that person should be the one to throw the first stone."

The woman braced herself for the impact. Jesus continued to gaze at us. Why did I get the feeling that it was us who were under scrutiny and not her? Why, in particular, did I get the feeling that his gaze was boring a hole right through me? One by one stones were dropped and people turned and walked away. Soon there was no one left except her and him and me. He turned to her first. "Has anyone condemned you," he asked. "No, sir." "Then neither do I condemn you. Go home and, and think about how you really want to live your life." She left, and I wanted to leave too. But he said to me, "If you have a minute I'd like to tell you a story." What was he up to? What were his motives? Was he trying to make a fool of me? But his face was relaxed and his eyes were kind. In spite of myself, I moved closer to him. "Have a seat," he invited me. I sat down beside him. "Just imagine," he began, "that it's your birthday. Two friends send you a gift. One of the gifts is wrapped in a beautiful gilded box, and tied with ribbons. But when you open it, you find to your disgust that all the fruit inside had

rotted. The other gift came in a torn and dirty box. You didn't even want to touch this box but when you finally did open it up, inside you found a beautiful rose. Which gift would you treasure more?" "The rose," I replied, somehow feeling that I had walked into a trap. He was silent for a while. Then he continued. "The woman you wanted to stone to death has a rose in her heart. But to see it you have to look deeper than just the outside wrapping. You have to look with the eyes of the heart." I wanted to leave him. I was feeling distinctly uncomfortable, but he took my arm and looked straight into my eyes. "There's a rose inside you too," he said. "Let me show you how to find it." Maybe that's why I find it so hard to see the good in others. I haven't looked inside my own heart so as to tap into the love that God put there. A love that offers me grace and mercy and forgiveness. A love that I am meant to extend to others. So here I am, trying not to be so judgmental. Trying the very best I can. One thing I know for sure though, is that I am now finding a lot more roses than stones along my way. And I'm much more careful now, before I throw a box away.

Yes, we live in a world in which people think differently, act differently, live differently than we do. But, as Christians, we are to love them, not judge them. Like I said at the beginning, we are to love God and love our neighbor. And in truth, the two are inextricably bound together. Why? Because of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is God and Jesus is human. In him, divinity and humanity come together as one. Therefore, it's impossible to love him as God, without loving the humanity he created and embraced in the first place. Amen.