

Amish girls who had been killed. And Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at the shooter's funeral.

It's ironic that the killer was tormented for nine years by the pre-mature death of his own young daughter. He never forgave God for her death. Yet, after he cold-bloodedly shot 10 innocent Amish school girls, the Amish didn't judge him, but almost immediately forgave him and showed compassion toward his family.

In a world that is quick to judge and condemn, this reaction seems so strange. Many reporters asked, "How could they forgive such a terrible, unprovoked act of violence against innocent lives?" And that's such an important question.

The answer is that the Amish people are followers of Jesus – with strict thought forms around judgement and grace. In our world today that is radical, it's disarming, and it is life transforming.

So, the disposition of judgment is totally inconsistent with the Christian worldview. But to counteract it, Jesus gives us two useful tools. First, Jesus wants us to see the speck in our own eye and second, he doesn't want us to hold non-believers to our Christian standards.

But we still need something more. Those are both exercises of the head. But now we need an exercise of the heart.

It might seem like Jesus is changing the subject in the final section of our reading this morning. It might seem like he's moving on to another topic in his sermon. But I don't think he is. I think he is continuing in continuity with the theme of being judgmental.

He says, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

You see, Jesus knows that the answer to the judgmentalism based on self-

sufficiency isn't simply a change of mind. But it requires a change in the disposition of the heart. So, live not as people who have figured it all out and have all the answers and condemn those who don't – but live as needy people desperately in need of God's grace.

Humility is the answer. We are people who ask God, who seek God, who knock on God's door for what we need. "The Lord giveth and he taketh away." We live as those who are at the mercy of God's generosity and love. And if that reality has penetrated your heart, how strange it would be to judge others.

How can I judge someone else when I have empty hands and need God in every moment? I can't. I am, as author Leonard Sweet once wrote, "...just one hungry beggar telling another hungry beggar where to find real good food."

So, "do not judge, or you too will be judged." But instead, live recognizing your own need, your own brokenness, your own imperfection and respond to your neighbour in kind. With open hands, and open hearts, and gentleness in the way of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

"Sermon on the Mount: Healthy Relationships"

October 1st, 2023 — Selby United Church – Scripture: Matthew 7:1-11

By Rev. Mike Putnam

Have you judged anyone lately?

I'm going to bet the answer for most of us (including me) is... yes.

From the guy who drives below the speed limit on a busy road, to the off-beat person who's not picking up on your social cues, to your pot-smoking neighbour... it's so easy to judge. And judgment just gets worse from there. It's the basis of racism, sexism and almost every other 'ism' you can think of.

It's also fundamentally incompatible with authentic Christian faith. Jesus said Christians should be known for how deeply we love. Yet studies show that in the eyes of many non-Christians, we're known for how deeply we judge.

A recent study by Barna Group found that at least half of all Christians tend toward thoughts and actions of the pharisees rather than the thoughts and actions associated with Jesus Christ.

We try to stay away from people they disagree with, we don't talk about our own sins and struggles but are much quicker to talk about others', we believe people should help themselves rather than turn to others for help and we imagine that Christians are better kinds of people than those who don't share our faith.

But this morning Jesus tells us this is a problem. It's a big problem. In fact, it's such a big problem that Jesus commits one of the largest sections in his most famous teaching to calling it out and giving us strategies to deal with it.

"Do not judge" Jesus says simply.

And this is probably the most widely quoted statement from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – and it's probably most popular with those who know virtually nothing else about Jesus. But what does he mean?

Well, what's judgment? Well,

judgement can mean a few different things. It can mean to evaluate – Someone might say, "I didn't judge the distance very well". What they are saying is that they didn't properly evaluate how far something was.

Judgement can also have a moral component. You're trying to decide what is good and what is bad, just or unjust. You might judge that a certain packaged food product in the freezer aisle of the grocery store is not as "good" as the one you make at home. It's full of preservatives, cheaper ingredients and less healthy components. I've made that judgment.

And, we make these kinds of judgments all day long. We judge between breakfast options, we judge between word choices, we judge between the kinds of cars we're going to buy, we judge between potential spouses, and we judge between friends. In that sense we're very judgmental – and good for us!

But there's another kind of judgment that is used to punish, exclude or make a final determination. Romans 14:10 says, "Why do you judge your brother or sister? Why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat."

And this is the kind of judgment that Jesus is against. Being judgemental is not necessarily bad – in fact, in the remaining chapter of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is going to give us some very specific ways to make judgments. He's not saying don't be discerning. What he is saying is that our judgements should not be used to cut off or end relationships.

Because people who follow Jesus are not given the option to write off a child of God. Why? Because God doesn't do that to you. I mean, simply based on our behaviour God has every right to give up on us. Our track record doesn't look too good put next to Jesus'. But

he doesn't do that. But the deal is, neither can you.

Instead, Jesus gives us a metaphor and a parable to help us see what our responsibility is in light of Jesus' unrelenting grace towards us. Jesus is going to teach us how to have healthy relationships even with people who we disagree with or people who live far from God.

So, first Jesus gives us a metaphor. Ever had something in your eye and you can't get it out? What happens? Your eyes water, they burn and it pretty much blinds you. Jesus says, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"

Jesus is drawing our attention to the fact that we've all got something in our eye. You know, I have learned that the hardest part of ministry is managing relationships between people who see something in other people's eyes but can't see what in their own.

But it's actually not the hardest people that's the real problem. The real problem when lovely, hardworking, committed people don't recognize their own propensity for sin.

Because at our best we're all amazing. When our needs are met, when we're well rested, when our stress levels are low – we knock it out of the park! But that's so often not the case. And so, church gets hard when I go from pastoring to playing the referee between people who don't know recognize their own shadow sides.

And the problem is a spiritual one. Because when you can see other's sins, but you can't see your own, it makes us prideful and haughty. It makes us intolerant and stubborn.

And since we so rarely see our own sin clearly, it means we can't fix our own sin on our own. We need help with this.

When you have something in your eye what do you want? Someone to help you with it with great gentleness. "Can you see

it?" "How big is it?" "Can you get it out?"

But if someone shows up to help you with something in your eye with a screwdriver and a pair of pliers, you're going to get pretty nervous. No tools – a tissue maybe – flush it with some water. Gentleness!!! And that's what Jesus is getting at with this eye metaphor. Because we need people to help us when we've got sin stuck in our lives – but we need it to be done so very gently.

But a follower of Jesus needs to be aware of his own problems before she sees others' – why? Because it will make you gentle. If you know what it's like to have your eye poked at you will be a whole lot gentler when it comes time for you to do the poking.

Okay, so that's the metaphor. We're dealing with eyes – and eyes require us to be gentle with one another. So now we come to Jesus' parable.

And Jesus has used this kind of parable before. Remember? When Jesus meets the Canaanite woman in chapter 15, he calls her a dog! It's shocking. Pretty judgmental, frankly!

But Jesus is using the vernacular of his time and culture. Those who were not Jews were often called dogs or pigs. We have to see the humour here rather than simply being offended by Jesus words. Jesus has just told us not to be judgmental and now he's calling a group of people names. I think Jesus has a smirk on his face - having broken the very rule he just gave.

But what is happening in this mini parable? Jesus says, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet and turn and tear you to pieces."

What are the sacred things and pearls Jesus is talking about here? Well, I think it is the teachings of Jesus – the truth about the reality of the kingdom of God that is breaking into the world through him. It's the wisdom of God for the people of God. But these truths will not make sense to those who

have not yet been converted by the Holy Spirit. In fact, asking people to live as if God is the king of your life might actually insight anger and resentment from those who live far from God.

But Jesus is saying don't condemn others for not thinking like you do. Your way of thinking and acting has been formed in you by your beliefs about the very nature of the world – but had it not been for the work of the Holy Spirit in you, none of this would have made any sense. And so, it's not reasonable to judge others who think differently because they have not received the gift of truth that God has given you.

I think of ancient Rome. Two thousand years ago it was culturally normative to expose babies that were unwanted. If you had a child and you didn't want it, it was considered morally and legally okay to just leave the infant in a ditch to die. No one would have found that shocking.

Because lots of people had unwanted children – having children you couldn't provide for could put your whole family at risk – birth control wasn't an option. And so, countless babies were simply left to the elements to die.

But along come the Christians in the first and second centuries and they could not abide by this. This practice was repugnant in light of what they believed about the value of human life - for each of those little ones bore the image of God.

So, what did they do about it? Did they protest? Did they lobby the government to change the laws? Did they shame those who did this, or organize an information campaign to change people's minds about it?

No, Christians took it upon themselves to look after these unwanted babies. They invented the orphanage. They used their own money and resources and started to look after other people's children as if they were their own.

If they had done the former – trying to fight and shout and impose their moral

truths on others, they would have been viewed as a nuisance and out of touch with reality. Instead, they took the full cost of this social moral failure upon themselves. And in light of this costly act of love, slowly and surely the world changed its mind.

Tim Keller once noted that in our time and culture there is a whole lot of shouting. He says, "When we meet people who do not share our values today all we can do is yell."

Charles Taylor, the Canadian sociologist once said, "When western people, with our high ideals, meet non-western people who do not share our values we try to impose our values onto them, and this is the same western imperialism we've been exporting forever."

You see, trying to impose our ideas on others will never work. Throwing pearls at people doesn't advance the kingdom of God! Instead of judging and condemning, we are called to demonstrate the possibilities of love that take root in the kingdom reality.

Jesus says there is another way, but it will cost you something. But Jesus says, "look at me. Look at what I did. Look at what it cost me. So, take up your cross."

Following the tragic Amish school shooting in 2006, where 10 young schoolgirls in a one-room Amish school house were senselessly murdered, reporters from around the world invaded Lancaster County to cover the story.

However, in the hours and days that followed an unexpected story developed. In the midst of their grief over this shocking loss, the Amish community didn't cast blame or judgment, they didn't hold a press conference with attorneys at their sides. Instead, they reached out with grace and compassion toward the shooter's family.

That same day Amish neighbors visited the shooter's family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain. Later that week the family was invited to the funeral of one of the