

All Saints Talk

Sunday 29th January 2023

Ruth Rhodes

Sermon Title: **'Be non-judgmental'**

Reading: Luke 6:37-45 Fruitful trees and non-hypocrites

It's a challenging passage, I think Jesus says, take the plank out of your eye. Who's he talking to? His first century audience of disciples and hangers on? Yes. All Saints Weston? Yes. Me? Yes. I've been preparing the sermon for several weeks now. And I've been really challenged by my own condemning and judging spirit. And please don't think that that's now fixed. There's a lifetime of work that God still has to do in my heart, on this very matter. So I feel I'm slightly thin ice talking about hypocrisy, as a hypocrite. It's really comforting to think he's just talking about the Pharisees, but I don't think he is. Is he talking about you? Yes. In fact, I think if we think we have no plank in our eye, then we almost certainly have a plank in our eye. This, I think, is classic Jesus, harpooning us personally, with his laser sharp, accurate insights into the human heart, and the problems of the human condition. Problems we're all grappling with. You see, I think it's in our human nature, to find fault with things. And we often follow that with criticism, whether that's the quiet mutterings of discontent or like a full on venting of fury, or even if we don't say anything at all, but we're thinking it, and our minds are clouded by that judgment. We are naturally quick to find fault in others, and slow to perceive it in ourselves. We're harsh when it comes to the failings of others. But we go easy on ourselves. We overemphasize the wrongs of others, but we underestimate or ignore our own.

And more than that, I've come to think that a critical or skeptical or negative worldview is lauded in our society as a sign of intelligence. But the problem is, it's contrary to the kingdom of God. So how are things measured in the kingdom of God? For the measure you use, it will be measured to you. To help us to obey Jesus teachings even and especially when it goes against the grain of human pride. I think we need to realize and

fall in love with again, our God of unattainably high standards, and indescribably deep mercy. To understand why we can't judge one another. We need to understand how God judges us. What measure are we using? The first verses is in our reading: 'do not judge and you will not be you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned'. It's not saying that if we're non judgmental, then God will be really nice to us too. It doesn't work like that. Jesus is actually saying, if we've grasped the gospel of what God has done for us, in His grace and in His mercy, then we will be demonstrating that by showing his grace and mercy to our brothers and sisters. The tree will bear the fruit.

So this is like a talk of two parts this morning. The first part I just want us to grapple with and grasp afresh the gospel. The gospel is not 'oh, we were doing just fine, but you know, we just had a bit missing in our lives, so we got God and now we're even better.' No, our gospel, the gospel we preach, is that there was nothing that we could do that would make us good enough for God's Supremes standards. That we are faulty and flawed and faltering and weak and that we're too quick to judge we're too slow to recognize our shortcomings. Thomas Hale on this passage suggests we need to not judge others because on the Day of Judgment, we will need mercy ourselves. We worship a holy and perfect God. And we are irrevocably split due to the shattering nature of our sin. But we believe even in the midst of our sin and darkness, God broke through with the cross of Jesus. He reconciled us. And he gave to all of us, the undeserved gift of grace. Ephesians 2:4-5 puts it like this, 'but because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ. Even when we were dead in our transgressions, It is by grace, you have been saved'. The thing is when we judge one another it's as though we've swapped our Gospel of undeserved grace for some other, more legalistic gospel, where we're earning our way into heaven, where we judge our relative goodness by all our friends. How do we compare to them? What is our worth compared to them? We're weighing up a tally of rights and wrongs. But the only person to compare ourselves to is Jesus. That's the only measure worth applying. And when we've measured ourselves against the perfection of Jesus, then we need to measure with the measure God uses. The measure of his phenomenal mercy poured out into our laps in great generosity. A measure pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap. Or to put all of that more simply, I'm just one sinner,

looking at another sinner, at the foot of the cross. And that's church. That's All Saints, Weston, just one sinner, looking at another sinner, at the foot of the cross. In fact, if you just look along the aisle now at the other people along your pew, just one sinner, looking at another sinner, at the foot of the cross. Eugene Peterson, in his translation of this passage in the message puts it really beautifully. I think he says, live out this God created identity, the way our father lives towards us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. So the reason that every single one of us can live out this teaching of Jesus, even though it seems so unnatural, and countercultural is because we can all realise a fresh our God created identity. And the grace poured out undeservedly upon our heads. We can love one another, in spite of our many shortcomings, from a place of knowledge of how deeply we are loved. How undeservedly we are shown grace, and how glorious our God is. Or to put it another way, God loves you, you don't deserve it. So how about we just love everyone else who doesn't deserve it too.

In the second part, I want us to then take that theological approach and then go, okay but how do we apply that to daily life? What does that look like? Because in this passage, Jesus made a reference to teachers: students are not above their teacher, but all who are fully trained will be like their teacher. And because I'm a secondary English teacher, I hope you don't mind me putting a few teaching analogies in here. The first thing is this, criticism can be damaging. Early in my teaching career, all enthusiastic, I was returning first drafts of Pride and Prejudice coursework essays, I'd covered them with feedback. I had one student in particular, Sarah, hers was sort of a low B grade and wanted to help her to an A. I gave her lots of advice, handed the essays back. I became aware that Sarah was crying in the back of my classroom. So I took her out the classroom and said 'Sarah, what's wrong?' She said 'I just feel rubbish. You've torn apart my essay. I must be useless at English. I'll never be any good.' And I realised how badly I got it wrong. You see overwhelming criticism, however well intentioned or earnestly meant, no matter how much we intended it for good Christian discipline or discipleship, It can be in reality, crushing. And I think sometimes we need to hear that.

The second thing that Jesus points to here is that criticism when combined with hypocrisy breeds deep discontent. And so I work now with some trainee teachers across all the Bath schools and in my first session with them on professionalism, I have to cover

five key areas of professionalism, one of them is punctuality. I'm on very thin ice because if you know me, you'll know my timekeeping is one of my many flaws, and I'm frequently late. But I say to them, it's really important that you are faultlessly on time. But if you are late because the reality is, you're crossing the school from one lesson to the next, you bumped into a lost child, or there was some behaviour you couldn't walk past, the assembly overran there was a safeguarding issue, for all sorts of reasons you might be late, and I say the first thing you do when you're late is you look your class in the eyes and you say, 'I'm really sorry, that I'm late.' Because I tell you a group of people who can spot hypocrisy in my life, and that's teenagers.

Brennan Manning said, a really powerful quote, and you might take issue with the first four words. But I think it's immensely powerful. Brennan Manning said this. 'The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, and walk out the door, and denounce him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.' And I guess that's why Jesus brings this passage of hypocrisy into sharp focus here. The third thing is we don't hear criticism if we don't respect the person giving us a criticism. It just washes off us like water off a duck's back. But on the other hand, criticism when it comes from a place of respect is really valuable. When I was first training to be a teacher, my mentor was a brilliant lady called Jane Mallord. I sat in her lessons, and I watched her teach. And I was like, Wow, this woman is amazing. And then through my year of teacher training, and the years after, as I worked for her many times, she sat in my lessons. And she gave me criticism, on all the things that I needed to do. And I listened to every word. And I valued her every word. Because I knew how brilliant she was, and I wanted to be like her. And one more thing, God knows everything. And he has an understanding of all the parts of people and their past that we don't. There have been times when as a form tutor, I've had to say to my form, I know that student is being really difficult at the moment and it's really hard to get along with them and it's really challenging having them in your lessons, and I can't tell you all the reasons why I just need you to trust me. If you knew what I know, you'd give them a lot of grace. And I mean, as a form tutor, if I knew what I know about what's going on with them at home, about what they're battling every day just to get here, you'd give them more grace. And I think sometimes God's like that with us. God is the only one who knows everything. And he's therefore the best

judge. We better just leave the judgment to him. But actually, in many ways in this passage is not so much about how do we judge others or handle criticism? I think Jesus is calling us to judge ourselves. And actually, our critical instincts are really good for us. If we could just turn the lens off everybody else and turn it on to ourselves. Jesus is calling us to seek out the planks in our eyes. How can you say 'friend, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye. You hypocrite. First, take the plank out of your eye. So can we develop the skills of self assessing?

Two last teaching things? As a trainee teacher, you write your lesson plans and after every lesson you have to scrutinise how it went you have to write what went well, and what didn't go well, what you'd change and do differently in the future. There's this constant self scrutiny, which I think is really good for early years teachers. In fact, a bit of research has been done that suggests that teachers are at their very best, not in their 30th year of teaching, but in their third year of teaching, which I think comes back to it being a time where you are still really analysing what you do and trying to make improvements and not just sort of sitting back and being complacent.

I taught a student some years ago, in year seven, who really struggled with English, really struggled with with writing in particular, with spelling, with punctuation, with organising her work. And I trained this year seven class that before they handed in their books to me, they should go through it with purple pen, and make corrections and make changes and edit it. And, you know, some people buy into that more than others, some students who otherwise had great writing would hand in something and they'd crossed out the word bad and put horrible, like, okay, it's better. It's not a lot better, but it's better. This student would hand in her book and it was covered with purple pen. She'd like put in all the punctuation and she corrected some spellings, and then she put in better words, and then she'd change whole sentence orders., and then she'd write a new opening, and then she'd switched around the orders of paragraphs, and it just was covered. Her perseverance, her tenacity, her dedication to improve her working on all the little bits was so impressive. I teach that student again now in the Upper School, in a top set. I think there's something for us in that determination to work on the little areas of our lives. It's true of our spiritual progress, that if we're willing to be diligent and put

in the time and really seek to improve, then we'll see great spiritual progress too. Jesus says, just after this passage, if we want to judge, we should look at our hearts and look at our fruit. He says 'No good tree bears bad fruit nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes or grapes from briars. Good people bring good things out of the good stored up in their heart. And evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up in their heart. For out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks'.

Just imagine for me for a moment, that every word that you had said in the last seven days, was all visible before your eyes now in a transcript; every word you've said and every word you've typed, perhaps every thought that you've had. I wonder how you feel? I feel pretty ashamed. In this passage, but in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 12:36, Jesus adds, 'but I tell you, that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment of every empty word they have spoken'. Some translations put that as every useless word, some, every careless word. Either way, we get the point.

What I want to end with is some good news. The good news is that being judgmental and therefore fundamentally hypocritical is so woven into our daily lives that it gives us ample opportunity to practice this teaching of Jesus. Determining to fight our human instincts to be critical and negative, and replace it with a spirit of God. A spirit of grace and love and mercy and kindness and humility. Jesus is the ultimate example of humility.

I am just one sinner, looking at another sinner, at the foot of the cross. So this week when we're tempted to be judgmental, or in my case, more likely after I have been judgmental, we need to repent. We need to determine to change even in that split second as the words come tumbling out of our mouth, to determine to change our attitude of judgment into gratitude for grace. I'm just one sinner, looking at another sinner, at the foot of the cross. And maybe one final thought for this week is to consider kneeling in prayer. Tom mentioned it a few weeks ago and I was really struck by it. That placement of oneself, down on our knees at the throne of a God of unattainably high standards, but also a God of undeservedly deep grace. I'm just one sinner, looking at another Sinner at the foot of the cross. Amen.