
Lent: Give up being judgmental
Martin Grove United Church
April 7, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 12:1-8

The story we just read from the Gospel of John is certainly a famous story. In fact, it might be 4 famous stories. Because biblical scholars cannot agree on how many versions of the story there are. This is one the Jesus stories - if it is in fact one story - that is found in all 4 of the gospels. But there are differences between the different versions of the story, which means that each of us are invited to decide for ourselves whether the 4 stories represent 4 different events, or 4 different tellings of a single event. Or something else altogether. It's just so exciting! And I believe that this is the story that - when all 4 versions are smashed together - the early church used to decide that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute even though that is never stated directly. so pay attention!

All 4 gospels record a story of Jesus being in a house, sharing a meal with his closest friends and disciples, during which a woman pours expensive perfume on Jesus, and someone complains. In 3 of the gospels, the event happened in the city called "Bethany". In one gospel, the location is unnamed. In Matthew and Mark, the home in question belongs to Simon the leper, while in Luke the home belongs to a pharisee named Simon. In Matthew and Mark the woman is unnamed, which is very ironic since both accounts end with the line, "wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her". In Luke the woman is unnamed, but we are told she is a local person. In John, the woman is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. In paintings and iconography, however, the woman has been made to be Mary Magdalene, supporting the idea that she was a "sinful woman". In Matthew and Mark the perfume is poured on Jesus's head, while in Luke and John it is poured on Jesus's feet. In Matthew, Mark, and John, the woman's actions are objected to because they are seen as a waste of money. In Luke the woman's actions were not actually objected to. What was objected to was that Jesus let a "sinner" touch him so intimately. Personally, I think Luke's version is a separate story, and that Matthew, Mark, and John are each attempting to describe the same story from their own perspectives.

The version we just read, from John, was written about 50 years after Mark and Matthew were written, which may explain why we have the specific condemnation of Judas. It is very interesting to me that there is a lot of confusion between the Marys in these stories, and yet they are all simply called, “Mary” or left unnamed, but John takes no chances and names Judas fully, as “Judas Iscariot”, even though there are no other Judases in the gospels. Over time, people clearly learned to hate Judas. But perhaps that’s another story.

Now I hope that some of you have enjoyed learning one or two things about this famous gospel story. And I hope that some of you are starting to become a bit irritated that I am rambling on sharing statements that - while true - don’t seem very useful, and if we are honest, are not even particularly interesting. And I hope that some of you have stopped listening to me altogether. I mean - who cares how many of the stories name the town in question as “Bethany” anyway? The story is obviously about Jesus being anointed before his death - what possible difference does it make whether he was anointed on his head or his feet? Either end will do, right? Who cares about the identity of the woman 2000 years after the fact - whoever she was, she is long dead now. Why is Rev. Paul boring us like this?

Why? Because I was hoping for you to be reminded - in a small way - of what it feels like to be judgmental. And so, I wanted you to judge me. Negatively. So I tried to bore you all for a few minutes. Did it work? If it didn’t work, I can certainly try harder on another occasion! I wanted you to remind yourself what it feels like to be judgmental to help relate to the gospel story today. In the story, some person does something loving for Jesus, and without hesitation, someone else judges that person negatively, without even pausing to think of what the person’s intentions were. And it typifies human nature that we know exactly who the complainer was, while we have long since lost track of who the loving person was. Sound familiar? That’s what “being judgmental” is all about.

Before we jump in there, however, we should be clear on the difference between two things, namely, “being judgmental” and regular judging, which is sometimes called, “being discerning”. Some people have been told that they are too judgmental (who

hasn't?) and therefore have formed the idea that it is bad to judge at all. Is it always wrong to judge others? Is it always wrong to judge ourselves? Is it always wrong to be judgmental? If we are not supposed to judge things, how are we to know right from wrong? How are we to know what to do at all?

Well, believe it or not, it's not that complicated, really. The good news is that it's easy to tell the difference between discerning and being judgmental. The bad news is, in order to tell the difference, you have to be discerning, not judgmental.

Being judgmental comes from our own need to make ourselves feel better, or superior, to push other people down, to ridicule them. Being judgemental is using someone else's choices to pat ourselves on the back. Being judgmental is creating fictitious barriers to protect ourselves from falling into the traps that we push other people into. Being judgmental is - ironically - always about us and never actually about the other person. Being judgemental therefore takes very little mental effort - just ignore the fact you have no idea what's actually happening, and blast someone for being "so stupid". That's what happened in our gospel story, where Judas does not bother to find out what the woman had in mind, and he just criticizes. I could give more examples of judgmental behaviour, but I have a feeling that we all know lots of examples ourselves.

Being discerning, on the other hand, is driven by a desire to make reality better, for others or for ourselves. Being discerning involves humility, paying attention to the context, asking people what they are doing, feeling, hoping for. Being discerning requires deep listening. Being discerning takes actual effort, and is truly driven by the desire to help other people, or ourselves.

I could simply say that we should all give up being judgmental during Lent and leave it at that. But I won't. Because instead I want to call us during Lent not only to give up being judgemental, but also, to become more discerning. Becoming more discerning in our own lives - about our own lives - may help those of us who struggle with family or friends who consistently let us down. For example, some people believe in an idea of "unconditional love". Some people believe that we owe unconditional love to our parents, or our children, or our partners. But what happens if those people do not reciprocate our love, and in fact shun us or even abuse us? We want to love

unconditionally, but perhaps discover that the relationship we want to value so much simply cannot carry the freight. We need to learn how to discern functional from dysfunctional relationships. We need to learn to give ourselves permission to discern the difference between healthy and unhealthy behaviours. We need to discern that unconditional love is not a healthy construct. We need to accept the unbelievable fact that that we deserve peace.

There is another strange feature of being judgmental. Fundamentally, being judgmental is a rejection of the present. Being judgemental is the strong belief that what is right in front of your face - today - is inadequate and needs to be changed or fixed. Of course, many times in our lives there are things that need to be fixed. I would never deny that. But some people have practiced being judgmental for so long, that they find it hard to connect with the present moment - ever. Constantly fantasizing about a future that will be better usually means that you are not fully present right now. What is your relationship with the present moment? Are you here? Are you fully here? Do I need to re-create the cabin in our midst¹ so that you can be fully here?

Picture this scene. You are at the airport, waiting to get on a plane. You are in a huge lineup that appears to be going nowhere. You can just see the notice board that shows that flight are being cancelled. The longer you wait in line - going nowhere - more and more flights are being cancelled. You decide that the airport staff are incompetent and should all be fired. You vow that you will never use this airline again. The situation is terrible, right? No, the situation is neutral. The reality is simply this - you are standing and you are breathing. Is that so bad? You yourself are creating a narrative that makes your situation terrible. The situation is neutral, but you are lost in the future, not being in relationship with the present.

People who are not present today because they are fixated on some better future will miss that future anyway because when that future becomes the present, they will not be there - they will be lost in some other future. Consider this. It's Sunday. Perhaps you are not emotionally present now because you are fixating on the perfect Monday. But tomorrow - Monday - you will not be fully present either because on Monday you will be

¹ A reference to a demonstration during the sermon on March 24, 2019.

fixating on the perfect Tuesday. And believe me, some people live their whole lives like this. Make peace with the present moment, because that is all that you ever have. The peace of God, the grace of God, exist in the present. Being judgemental removes us from the present moment, which is where God - and grace - and peace - are to be found. So, this Lent, give up being judgmental and become more discerning. Here. Now.

Now in case all this talk about living in the present moment sounds too strange for you, I want to close with one other aspect of the gospel that is very down to earth and practical. If the message so far has been too heavenly-minded for you, here's a much shorter practical option. Jesus said, "the poor you will always have with you". Some people hear those words as if Jesus is resigned to the fact that societies will always have people that we call poor, so we shouldn't lose any sleep trying to eradicate poverty because it is inevitable. Some people hear those words as if it is God's will that some people are poor, which might make them feel better when they walk past a homeless person on their way to the Porsche dealer to tell them, "I've changed my mind, please give me those leather seats too". But if we just read a tiny bit more we get, "the poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me." Jesus was reflecting on how short his own time with his friends was, he was not saying that poverty is an intractable social ill that God ordains. And if that's not clear enough, in Mark's version Jesus says, "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want, but you will not always have me."

In Canadian society, and in Toronto, well, in most of North America really, it has become fashionable to punish poor people for being ... poor. From predatory loans, to a justice system that disproportionately collects poor people, and through other legal processes we actually punish poor people because they are poor. And that's certainly what we would do ourselves if we are being judgmental. But what if we use discernment? The down-to-earth, practical version of this sermon is this. Discern that all people are children of God - all people - and for Lent, find new and creative ways to engage with people who have even less security than you do. Who knows? You might even find Christ in your midst. Peace be with you.

Amen.