

I Want to Believe, But...

“What About Judgmental & Hypocritical Christians?” – Matthew 7:1-5

A Sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork, Associate Minister
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Loving God, help us remember the depth and breadth of your grace and compassion. And let it fill us, inspire us, and move us to deeper grace and compassion for others. Open our hearts and our minds to hear your call to us this day. Amen.

Today, we continue our sermon series: “I want to believe, but...” in which we are exploring some of the common obstacles to faith. Pastor Dave has already given two great sermons examining how science and religion can coexist in harmony and how to understand and approach the Bible. And today we’re focusing on the troubling reputation of the church (as an institution) and of church people (as individuals) as being judgmental and hypocritical.

I’m afraid we have to face the reality that this is a pretty common complaint. Sometimes it’s a result of a personal experience of not feeling welcome and accepted. Will those church folks accept me and not only tolerate, but affirm and understand me - the way I look, the way I dress, my tattoos and piercings, the way I talk, who I love, my gender identity, my ethnic identity, my age, how little or much money I have, my ability, my political affiliation, my tastes in music and culture, and so on.

There are a lot of folks out there who were raised in church or tried out church and have been burned by their experiences. There are also a lot of folks who are afraid or unwilling to try out church because they have heard others’ experiences or don’t know how they will be received. It’s understandable that some folks wouldn’t even want to put themselves through it. It’s understandable that some folks wouldn’t want to support an institution that has done harm to people they know and love.

Now, it is tempting to rush to saying, “but that’s not *our* church!” Every Sunday we say, “whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” And we mean it. And we are really trying to live it out. And our Bond of Union uplifts that there is plenty of room here for diversity and for many perspectives in that line that states: “we cherish for each person the fullest liberty in the interpretation of truth and we gladly grant others the freedom we claim for ourselves.” And we mean that. And we are really trying to live that out too.

It is absolutely vital that we continue not only to say those two statements, but also live into them, to learn from our past experiences as a congregation, and to continue to discern how we can continue to grow into their vision even more boldly and intentionally as a community.

But, in addition, it is also important to deepen our understanding of why Christianity has gotten this reputation as being judgmental and hypocritical in the first place. Plenty of people look at the church’s historical track record and say, “I’d like to believe, but...”

“What about anti-Semitism and the mistreatment and attempted destruction of Jewish people over the centuries?”

“What about the use of the Bible to justify slavery of Africans and the resulting reality of persistent racism?”

“What about the crusades and the legacy of anti-Islamic sentiment that is still alive?”

“What about the forced evangelism of Native Americans that was coupled with the colonization of their lands and attempted obliteration of those peoples and their cultures?”

“What about the judgment and condemnation of, and violence against LGBTQ people that still persists to this day?”

“What about the church’s tendency over the centuries to do lip service to caring for the poor while amassing huge amounts of wealth and property?”

People look at this historical record and think; those folks who claim to follow Jesus sure don’t act like him. They wonder; can any good come from this tradition? Or has Christianity, and organized religion in general, just caused more problems? “I’d like to believe, but... is Christianity just too flawed to bring about any good in my life or in the world?”

Now, it’s true; these issues are not only part of the story of Christianity, but also part of the bigger story of human history, of Western civilization, of America.

But, regardless, these deeply troubling and tragic elements are part of our story as church, as Christians. And I think it is part of our ethical responsibility not to simply ignore them or to get defensive. Instead, I think we are called to continue to grapple and wrestle with the ugly and problematic aspects of our story. We have to do so in order to learn from our mistakes, to ask for forgiveness, to work towards justice, to find paths toward renewed and right relationship, and to collaborate with others for a better future for all.

[And I’ll take this moment to offer a shameless plug: if you are interested in engaging more deeply in dialogue about the topic of race, in light of our faith, that is going to be the subject of my fall class beginning in September.]

This is an ongoing process, of course.

And we are a faith community, like many others, that is striving to be more open, loving, and just, that is trying to walk in the way of Jesus – a community that is trying to do things differently even though Christianity has, unfortunately, earned its reputation of being judgmental and hypocritical.

We are a faith community, like many others, who believe that this tradition we have inherited (though flawed and imperfect) does have much good to offer the world too. We have seen it. We have participated in it. We have experienced it for ourselves.

We are a faith community, like many others, who bear witness to the ability of God’s Spirit to move, and inspire, and redeem, and transform, and resurrect, despite human fallibility, despite our big mistakes.

It’s also important to point out that judgment and hypocrisy is not only a Christian problem. There is a very human tendency to move from what might have been in our earliest human history necessary survival strategies of self-preservation and the formation of group identity into passing judgment or condemnation of others.

This crosses cultural and historical boundaries. It can be easy for us humans to point fingers, and to band together in like-minded tribes, and blame others for our problems, and be *hypercritical* of others while ignoring or dismissing our own faults. I’m afraid we’ve done it since the dawn of time. And when this tendency gets coupled with political and economic power, it leads to systemic oppression, control, and marginalization of people.

And clearly Jesus encountered this in his own world: the systemic domination of the Roman Empire, but also everyday folks slipping into judgmental and hypocritical behavior. Otherwise he wouldn't have had to teach the lesson we heard in our scripture reading this morning.

“Do not judge,” Jesus says. “So that you may not be judged.” “The measure you give will be the measure you get.” This is actually quite an interesting warning! God is the only worthy judge in Jesus' mind. And God will measure us by the same standard we have used to judge others. Show mercy, compassion, and grace to others and that's what we'll receive from God. But if we show judgment and condemnation, what should we expect in return? Yikes!

But here's the thing, if we take seriously that the character of God (which Jesus demonstrated to us through his life and ministry) is grounded in love, mercy, compassion, and grace, then we know what we should do. If that's how God operates, isn't that how we ought to operate?

So why, asks Jesus, are you focusing on the tiny speck in your neighbor's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you possibly even focus and see if there is a speck in your neighbor's eye at all? It's a funny, gross, and exaggerated image that gets the point across: Start with the log in your own eye, silly. Start with yourself. Hold up a mirror and take a good look with your good eye and start there. And get some help if you need it.

It's hypocritical and self-righteous to go around pointing fingers at others and never acknowledge our own faults and imperfections. Maybe by acknowledging our own faults and imperfections, we'll learn some mercy and compassion.

We have to practice mercy and compassion for ourselves too, by the way. But that involves self-reflection. Hypocrisy is a lack of self-reflection. The word literally means too little critique. But self-reflection, repentance, and forgiveness, on the other hand, can lead to deeper compassion for all (including ourselves). And maybe by engaging in this process, we'll be reminded that God operates from a place of love and grace for us and for all. And maybe we'll let that shape how we operate in our relationships with others and in the world.

What I think Jesus is advocating in this lesson is communal ethical reflection and moral discernment. It's not just an “anything goes” mentality. Clearly there are behaviors and practices that Jesus was *not* ok with – clearly, he was not ok with the abuse and exploitation of the poor, for example.

Sometimes we do need to recognize a wrong and figure out how to make it right. Sometimes we might need to help each other out with the various specks in our eyes, so we can all see a little more clearly.

But how we bring ourselves into this communal space matters. How we approach this kind of collective dialogue, reflection, and discernment matters.

We have to enter in with humility, with a willingness to engage in deep self-reflection, with a willingness to ask for help when we need it, and with a willingness to be challenged and changed. That's how growth and transformation can happen.

And paying attention to power dynamics in relationships is part of the practice of humility. When we find ourselves in the more powerful position (whether it be political, economic, or some form of social privilege – like being white, male, heterosexual, and/or cisgender), then the practice of humility might lead us to take a step back, to listen before speaking, to follow instead of lead.

We also have to enter in with hospitality, openness, and graciousness towards others, with a curiosity and willingness to really listen and to try and understand the experiences and perspectives of others. It seems to me that deeply listening to one another can go a long way in alleviating our human tendency to rush to judgment.

And we have to enter in without condemnation. There is no room for condemnation of people for being themselves in God's Kingdom. And I hope and pray that the church in the world will continue to find the courage to let go of damaging beliefs, church structures, and ways of operating that keep certain people down. The church is always a work in progress.

And so, to continue this work, we have to enter into this communal discernment with celebration of our diversity as God's beloved children, with affirmation and pride in the beauty of our variety. Let us claim the truth of our faith that we are all made in the image of God. So, if we want to see God, let's look around; let's appreciate people for who they are. And let's get to know, understand, and love one another more deeply.

Part of this is to refute the misuse of the Bible as a weapon. The Bible is a wonderful tool for faith and a witness to the faith stories and theological reflections of those who have gone before us. But we have to recognize that it was written and compiled by human beings who were inspired by their experiences, but also limited by their human perspectives (just as we all are). They were shaped by their cultures, times and places, and histories, as much as anyone else.

So, let's approach the Bible carefully. Let us be mindful of its historical contexts. Let us explore it with open hearts and minds. Let us be unafraid of the varied perspectives and contradictions within it. Instead, let us learn more about them and continue the theological conversation. Let us be unafraid to disagree with or question ideas put forth by biblical text at times. It's ok to do that. Jesus did it (you don't have to take my word for it).

In all of this communal reflection and discernment, let us ground ourselves in God's love and grace. For if love and grace are the place we start and the place to which we return when we need to start again, we are much more likely to find new life, growth, transformation, and an experience of God's love in community.

And isn't that really what we're after? Isn't that really what this church thing is all about? To celebrate God's love and grace in our lives and share it abundantly!

This is the call of discipleship. This is the call to be the church. This is what Christianity ought to focus on.

And yes, this can be hard work sometimes, especially when we have to correct missteps and try again. And it does take patience, persistence, and courage. But it's worth it. And positive transformation is possible.

And though we can't wipe away all of the wrongs done in the name of the church, or change every mind that believes Christians are judgmental and hypocritical, perhaps (with God's help), love, mercy, compassion, and grace can become what we're *best* known for. Amen.