

We continue this morning in our summer series on questions that Jesus asks. In today's story in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is nearing the end of the Sermon on the Mount. This morning we find one of Jesus' parables in the form of rhetorical questions. That's right. Jesus asks two questions in today's text. Jesus often used exaggerated images in order to emphasize the idea that underlies his instruction. In today's text, his instruction is found in the first two verses. One of my favorite quotes from preacher William Sloane Coffin is actually an Andrew Lang quote. "We often use scripture like a drunk uses a lamppost: for support rather than for illumination." May we allow God's Spirit to illumine us through God's word for us this day. Before turning to God's word, let us pray using verse one in GTG #451. **PRAY.** *Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth Thou hast for me; place in my hands the wonderful key, that shall unclasp and set me free. Silently now I wait for Thee, ready, my God, Thy will to see; open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!* **READ.**

Growing up I was a nosey kid. I overheard my parents talking about different people, and I would ask questions. I remember strange details from their conversations, and I had things I wanted to know. I would often have a litany of questions I wanted answered before I would go to sleep. My poor parents. I also embarrassed my family by asking direct and curious questions in public. My mom would grab my elbow, bend down and sternly whisper in my ear to "mind my own business." However, there were certain things that needed to be addressed, in my not so humble opinion. My family didn't do conflict well. Whose does? Let's start on some common

ground. Newsflash: we all sin. We all have deviated away from the path God calls us to follow. Yet, some don't like to claim- like Paul says in Romans- that we all have sinned and fall short of God's glory (3:23). And sometimes as Christians we come across as hypocrites or as self-righteous, looking at others with disgust or pity. Every congregation has their moral watchdogs, faultfinders and those who are on the ready to point the finger of judgment to others. "I think what turns people off most about religious people is when we point out the sins of others but act as though we have no sins of our own" (Adam Hamilton, *Half-Truths*)- when we deny that we are just as in need of God's saving grace as anyone else. Where's the fun in that?! Pastor and Author Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it this way: "Our drug of choice right now is knowing who we're better than." That sounds harsh, but I think she is right. We have a need to think of ourselves as "good." Another way to say that is we have a need to think of ourselves as better than others. And judgment gives us a quick little dose of superiority. For a moment, we feel better, not because we have grown or changed, but because we have found someone we can place beneath us. Judgment gives us the feeling of becoming better without requiring us to become different. Bolz-Weber continues, "I know that there are cases where creating a distance between ourselves and family or friends makes sense for the purpose of survival and self-preservation. [That is called discernment kind of judging.] I wonder though if this is happening more due to another person's *stance on an issue* and what we are being told that MEANS about them, rather than it happening due to how that person actually treats us and others" ([link](#)). Nadia asks a most excellent question. "In an effort to

think of ourselves as righteous, are we maybe losing our humanity?" The bottom line of today's text summed up is that we all have faults and we all need mercy.

What Jesus is talking about in today's text is more of a condemning type of judgement. At the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, we find Jesus telling the crowds, including his disciples not to judge others. Jesus knew that people, including his disciples, would always struggle with the tendency to judge others-aptly so. And he tells them, as he often did, by using an absurd and memorable metaphor: the speck in your sibling's eye compared with the log in your own eye. So then why does he say don't judge if he knew it would be pretty much impossible not to judge? Many scholars say that the word "judge" here is neither accurate nor helpful (Warren Carter, workingpreacher.org). Generally, in Matthew, "judgment" refers to God's end-time judgment. Therefore, it is really misleading to translate the Greek this way, as we all judge and should at times, especially when it comes to discerning how we are to live in relation to God's purposes. This interpretation of judging suggests something that is impossible to live up to and to obey. The verb used here commonly signifies condemning someone to hell. Therefore, it's really "Do not condemn someone to hell." "This translation addresses various situations involving other people: conflict, fear of outsiders, intolerance of difference, prejudice, disdain, anger, etc. In such situations, people can write others off as beyond redemption, outside God's grace, and consign them to hell. The command forbids the arrogance of denying mercy, even dignity, to another. Followers of Jesus have no right to declare someone is beyond God's

mercy. Jesus warns us here. If a disciple denies mercy to another, mercy will be denied to that disciple (7:1-2). This text- instead- urges self-awareness and prioritizes self-correction in engaging another (7:3-5)" (Carter). Jesus' disciples are not to condemn people to hell because any condemning that needs to be done will only be done by Jesus. "For those who follow Jesus to act as if they can condemn others on their own or determine what is good and what is evil is to betray the work of Christ. Therefore, the appropriate stance for the acknowledgment of evil is the confession of sin. We quite literally cannot see clearly unless we have been trained to see 'the log that is in our eye.' But it is not possible for us to see what is in our eye because the eye cannot see itself. That is why we are able to see ourselves only through the vision made possibly by Jesus- a vision made possible by our participation in a community of forgiveness that allows us to name our sins" (Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*). "Maybe this is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, *the Gospel is frankly hard for the pious to understand. Because the Gospel confronts us with the truth saying you are a sinner, a great and desperate sinner. Now come as the sinner you are to the God who loves you madly*" (Bolz-Weber). This is why Nadia sometimes likes to say, and I absolutely agree with her, that the Gospel is like, the *worst* good news she's ever heard.

All this to say that before we can call out another person's sin, we first must address our own. This kind of condemning is not for us to do. It is only a job for God. There's a story told from Billy Graham's eldest daughter, Gigi, who was interviewed after her father's death. She tells the story of her escorting her father to *Time* magazine's 75th anniversary party, which was held in

Washington, DC. President Bill Clinton spoke at the event. He had just been impeached by the House of Representatives for perjury and obstruction of justice. The charge of perjury involved the President lying under oath about his relationship with staff intern, Monica Lewinsky. Billy Graham and Gigi's seats were next to President and Mrs. Clinton. Mr. Graham was warm and gracious to them. After dinner in the car ride back to their hotel, Gigi and her father discussed the difficulties the president and the First Lady were going through with so many people gossiping and judging. Gigi said her father's simple comment was, "It's the Holy Spirit's job to convict; it's God's job to judge; and it's our job to love" (Hamilton). What did Jesus say were the greatest commandments of all? To love God with everything you've got and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus makes explicit what is implicit in reiterating the Golden Rule, namely that we cannot separate these two because they are interdependent. Jesus then declares that "all the law and the prophets" hang on these two commandments, which means that without obeying them, the others really cannot be obeyed. Jesus is not saying a common workaday wisdom but a saying of the kingdom of heaven. What do the children of God want others to do to them? Jesus calls them/us to treat the world the same way, to treat the world as if it were already restored.

This is yet another reminder that even though some of us would love nothing more than to be moral judges, demanding change in others, Jesus requires that before we call for the transformation of someone else, we be transformed ourselves. What keeps us from doing the work to recognize

and address the log in our own eye? Perhaps “we fear the intimacy of God’s love, desiring instead to believe that we are separated from God by vast space? But in Christ, God has drawn near to us and to our neighbor. Jesus never tells his disciples that this journey will be easy or that many others will join us along the way. We are only able to walk such a road, Bonhoeffer suggests, because we can see Jesus walking ahead of us and with us. And just maybe on this road of discipleship we’ll notice the log in our own eye and recognize that God is the ultimate judge and God’s mercy is greater than our sins? And then perhaps we’ll show compassion to our neighbor instead of condemnation. For God’s measure is one of mercy, not condemnation. God in Christ shows mercy even when we don’t deserve it. There couldn’t be a more profound image of God’s mercy than the cross. The cross is a powerful reminder not only of the Author of our Salvation, the Perfector of our Faith, Jesus Christ, but also of what God’s tender mercy- what others may judge as less than or unworthy, reveals. “Jesus ups the ante so that we realize how futile the human righteousness ranking system is. And he does this so we will finally trust in God’s grace and mercy (which is endless) and not trust our own righteousness (which is deeply flawed and super limited)” (Bolz-Weber). The Gospel demands a lot of us. We have to be accountable for our words and actions- not only in worship but out in the world. Our job isn’t to condemn people to hell but to love. For as heirs of Jesus Christ, we cannot love God while refusing to love who and what God loves. Christianity without love is no longer of Christ. If we defined ourselves by our sins, we would be unlovable. But God in Jesus doesn’t say or do that. No! Amazing Grace! And in response to God’s gift of

amazing grace, we are called to follow in the footsteps “of the one who stood in the presence of his accusers and enemies and declared love the be-all and end-all” (DebieThomas, journeywithjesus.net).

Yes only those who realize the immensity of their moral struggle, those who have felt the weight of the log in their own eye, are able to serve as a resource for others. Think NA or AA. Those who are fighting addiction are helped most not by people who scold or shame or judge, but by those who have admitted their own powerlessness, those who confess that the springs of moral refreshment come only from God” (Thomas Long, *Matthew*). This is what humility looks like. I see and experience humility in love most days here at Triune. I see it in my neighbors who are struggling to stay alive. I see it in the moments when someone breaks down and finally apologizes for something they really wish they could’ve pawned off onto someone else. Every Sunday I see hope in the brief moments of humility that come from saying the words on the front of the bulletin while looking at a neighbor’s face. “This is why The Great Human Competition Extravaganza is spiritually meaningless: because God isn’t ranking anyone. The Gospel confronts us in our virtue and says *You need not rely on your ability to be better than others. Lay down the ranking system. Walk away from your projects of self-perfection. None of it matters. You can stop trying to earn-by-comparison what has already been freely given to you: your freedom, your blessedness, your right to be loved.* So, stop it! Whether speck or log, none of it is safe from the terrible mercy of the everlasting God, anyway” (Bolz-Weber). Thanks be to God! Amen.