

Judge Not
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(My mother always told me to start my sermon with a joke...)

A Rabbi and a Roman Catholic Priest were sitting next to each other at an Inter-faith event. When dinner was served someone thoughtlessly had placed a slab of ham in the Rabbi's plate. The Rabbi did not protest but simply proceeded to eat other things his faith and physician permitted. The Roman Catholic priest leaned over in the direction of the Rabbi and said. "Rabbi Cohen, you and I know that the dietary laws from the Old Testament were developed at a time when pork meat was indeed dangerous due to lack of refrigeration and low heat in cooking. Of course, trichinosis was rampant and your ancestors in the faith were right in prohibiting eating pork in order to save the lives of many Israelites. Those days are gone, pork is safe and there is no reason to cling to outmoded ancient practices. When will you eat your first mouthful of ham, Rabbi Cohen?" The Rabbi paused briefly and then responded, "at your wedding, Father Maguire, at your wedding."¹

I've spent some time this week re-reading Paul's letter to the Romans, in part to get caught up on my Covenant bible study from the lesson I missed. Good old Paul and I have a fraught relationship, okay it is really a one-sided fraught relationship. He has some lovely things to say about spiritual gifts and running the race before us. He also has some things to say about issues that make me want to throw his letters across the room, I so vehemently oppose what he is saying. And then a bit of an off-color joke² came across my social media this week about biblical interpretation and how in 2000 years folks, reading similar phrases with very different meanings, will just not get the joke due to the subtlety of language and how things can get lost in translation. As Rob Cline has been known to say, "Words have meaning!"³ It doesn't even take a millennium or two; sometimes an ocean can change the meaning of language...after all, British humor just lands differently from American.

¹ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002515/from_commandments_to_commitments

² (difference between butt dial and booty call)

³ Rob Cline, author and father of FPCC's sound tech Bryan Cline (quoted to this author on 9/15/23)

I remember being in Cuba on one Saturday about a year ago, while Osvaldo was teaching English to Luyano church members and friends. He was teaching them about English idioms and their meaning. It occurred to me that learning a language is much harder when you don't grow up surrounded by the contextual clues and meaning. I only speak English and have enormous respect for those Cubans who had received their doctorates in Russia, having learned multiple languages, and then have the capacity to also have deep intellectual discussions in a second or third language. I was humbled by their abilities. And I am humbled by those of you in this room who have mastered multiple languages as well.

When I was away last month in Montana preparing worship for the season, I took the time to look at the lectionary bible passages laid out for each Sunday and determine which ones spoke to me. For this Cuba Sunday, the lectionary passage that grabbed me was from Paul's letter to the Romans. The major theme of this passage was Paul telling the congregation in Rome not to judge one another. When passages of scripture grab me, it is more often than I care to admit that I personally wrestle with this issue and want to explore what the bible is saying about it. True confession time: I can be judgmental sometimes. My guess is I am not alone in being judgmental at times. While it may be pervasive, it is most decidedly NOT a good thing.

Questions I have overheard recently that could be deemed judgmental:

How come the Illini turn over the ball so much?

Why aren't they in school?

Why do they dress like that?

Why do they park in a handicapped space? They don't look disabled...

What was she wearing?

Can't they keep their kids quiet?

Why do they drive a gas-guzzling van? Don't they care about global warming?

Why is that music so loud?

She's a stay-at-home mom, how come she isn't nursing her baby?

How come folks drive up to the food pantry in big, new cars?

Where are their parents?

Can't they behave?

Ah, but according to whose standards? And who says WE get to cast judgment on others? I mean, don't many of us do that very thing?

A week ago, I participated in a local 5k race called the Run to Remember. The first one was held on the 20th anniversary of September 11, and there was a pointed letter to the editor the next week complaining about disrespecting the memory of those who died on 9/11. But what the author did not know was a group of friends of a young man who tragically died just after high school graduation, gathered to honor him in cheering on those who were running as if it were their friend running. There are two things that are unique to this race that I absolutely love: a moment of silence before we race to hold in memory those whom we have loved and lost, plus the bibs on the backs of runners with names of loved ones they miss whose loss they carry with them. See the thing is, all too often we have such tunnel vision that we forget that we are *not* the only ones with wounds of loss. Everyone is carrying loss around with them, but these deep wounds are invisible.

On Monday of this nationwide Welcome Week, celebrating our immigrant brothers and sisters, we hosted an International Game Night. There were congregation members, folks from the campus Y immigration center, and some of our English Language Learners. While we may not have understood each other's languages, we sure understood the smiles and laughter. I was so glad I went and got thinking about those who told me they did not think it was appropriate to play games on September 11th. I found the spontaneous laughter I heard was such sweet balm in a hurting world.

Judge not

It is rather interesting that Paul, who has plenty of harsh words about whether women should be allowed to speak in church and who should or should not marry, has a message is about coming together and not to pass judgment on one another.

Christine Chakoian wrote in Christian Century:

“We, who call ourselves Christian, aspire to fulfill Christ’s teaching—to do our best to be the body of Christ in the world. And it is phenomenally annoying when we encounter what I call “Christians who give Christ a bad name.”

Which isn't a new thing. The earliest Christians were torn apart by disagreements over what it meant to be faithful. Their differences were

primarily over which laws of the first covenant were essential to follow and which engagements with the complex religious activities of the Roman Empire must be avoided. Disagreements included:

- Whether a Christian could marry a non-believer. (*No*, according to 2 Corinthians 6:14; *on the other hand*, don't get a divorce, per 1 Corinthians 7:12-13.)
- Whether a Christian man must be circumcised according to the Abrahamic covenant. (*No*, according to 1 Corinthians 7 and other Pauline letters, *but others disagreed*, per Acts 15.)
- Whether a Christian woman was free to speak in church. (*No*, according to 1 Corinthians 14:34, *but in* 11:5 women are instructed to wear a head covering when they pray or prophesy.)
- Whether a Christian could eat meat that had been offered to idols—so common a practice in the empire that by the time meat came to market, it would have been dedicated to some god. (*No*, according to Acts 15:28-29, *but sure*, if you understand that idols are not real, per 1 Corinthians 8:1-6.)⁴

I don't think Paul is really talking about the benefits or disadvantages of being a vegetarian, when he wrote, "Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables." (Romans 14:2) Sure, I personally try to do Meatless Mondays and not only include more vegetables in my diet, but also to eat responsibly (at least according to my current understanding). No, Paul was addressing an issue that was tearing apart the church in Rome. The decision to eat or abstain from certain foods pointed to deeper understanding of the faith, and both sides believed they were right. It was a kind of culture war in the church.

Culture wars

I don't believe that culture wars were limited to the church in Rome 2000 years ago. We certainly are living with culture wars in our society today as well: abortion, book banning, gun regulations, transgender care, just to name a few cultural front lines in the news this year. Unfortunate divisions we experience in the larger society are also felt in churches. From conservative to progressive, there are cultural divides in church.

⁴ Christine Chakoian, pastor of Westwood Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/first-century-culture-wars-24-romans-141-12>

I mean, seriously:

How many denominations does the Christian church need?

What is the right kind of worship music?

What about marriage?

Which translation of the bible is the best?

Who gets to be ordained?

Rev. Chakoian went on to say:

“Paul’s warning to the early Christians on either side is this: if you are going to engage with one another only to do battle, don’t bother. You may loathe the decisions your fellow Christians are making, but *you do not get to be the judge*. The only judge that matters is the Lord, to whom we are all accountable.”⁵

I have spent the week telling people that my sermon title was “Judge Not.” I hope those to whom I said it did not think I was judging them in what they were saying. In truth, I was saying it to myself. “Judge not, Judi.” (Not Judge Judy...no way!) But let’s admit, isn’t it kind of sleazily fun to judge?

The prevalence of courtroom tv, of discussing who has been indicted and who has judgments come down in courtrooms brings that practice more and more into our everyday life. Courtrooms and arrests are meant to keep civil society in order, to exonerate those who did not break the law and to punish those who transgress some statute. The more the media covers the case the ickier it all feels to me. Who is right; who is wrong? Or is it who is guilty? Who has a good enough lawyer to get them off?

But we are not talking here about civil society.

Paul was talking about church life.

It is often said that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the entire week. Sure, we like to be comfortable. We like to worship with music we are familiar with. Honestly, don’t we like to be with people who are like us? God’s world is so much diverse.

⁵ <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/first-century-culture-wars-24-romans-141-12>

Too often, the church becomes a haven for the like-minded. One dear friend spoke about her worship service and how her daughter did not like being uncomfortable with the views expressed from the pulpit. It can be a struggle to worship when we do not agree.

And yet...

Presbyterian and author Anne Lamott once wrote, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."⁶

She also wrote,

"The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns."⁷

Letting the mess hang there is uncomfortable. As a person of faith, I believe that God's light will break through; it just might take some time.

All too often, our society has come to be about who is right, about being certain that we know the actual truth. In John's gospel Pilate questioned Jesus about being King of the Jews, to which:

"Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸ Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" (John 18:37-38)

Ah yes, what is truth?

Paul tells us that who is *right* in this discussion of what to eat is not even the issue. Instead, we as fellow believers are to focus on God:

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14:8)

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? (Romans 14:10)

That is the question. Why do we pass judgment? Do we feel better about ourselves if we view others who do things differently as being wrong?

⁶ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Anne_Lamott

⁷ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Anne_Lamott

We are instead encouraged to focus on **community**, our unity in Christ Jesus. We are to focus on our commonalities.

Some 10 or 12 years ago a group of intrepid travelers from this congregation set out to forge a relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Cuba. In traveling around and visiting several congregations, they discovered the folks at Luyano in Havana have the most in common with our own congregation.

This partnership, this hermanamientos relationship, is different than we have had with other mission trips in the past. We do not go to Cuba to serve them. We go to build relationships, bridges of friendship that cross more than the 90 miles from Cuba to the U.S.

Going on this type of mission trip is not about constructing a building or cleaning up an area or mend a wall; no, this type of trip is to forge enduring relationships. It is not about what we can offer in terms of skill. Frankly our skills do not always translate, as the Cuban folks must be far more creative in their use of resources than we do. We Midwesterners are known as being nice. The hospitality and generosity of our Cuban brothers and sisters can be overwhelming when we understand quite how much it costs. But they count not the costs. It is the relationships that we build that are invaluable. We are treated as long-lost family returning home.

It is fortunate that we have 21st century tools to maintain contact when it is so difficult to be with one another. The issues separating our countries' governments are complex and will take time and energy to resolve. One important thing we can do is to let our Cuban brothers and sisters know we are thinking of them and holding them in our prayers, and we value their faithful example of being church.

Nearly 10 years ago, at the conclusion of the annual "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" — a global Christian observance sponsored by the World Council of Churches that is eagerly embraced by Cuba's churches.

"God is calling us to live in unity in Jesus Christ," said host pastor Fr. Roberto Ortiz, addressing a congregation of Catholics, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, Evangelicals and Pentecostals (and probably a few others as well).

"In the midst of globalization and its impacts on the poor and economic injustice in all countries, it is imperative that God's people everywhere live in unity," he said.⁸

⁸ <https://pcusa.org/news/2014/1/28/sing-east-and-west/>

That's just what Paul was telling the church in Rome.

In this room...we are the family of God right here. We do not all believe the same.

We do not all vote the same.

We do not all speak the same language.

But we are a family of faith. Families of all stripes come with all kinds of issues of their own. And yet...

We are called to love one another.

We get to practice loving each other right here.

Then we get to go out and embody it out in God's world.

Help Us Accept Each Other text by [FRED KAAAN](#)

Help us accept each other

as Christ accepted us;

teach us as sister, brother,

each person to embrace.

Be present, Lord, among us

and bring us to believe:

we are ourselves accepted

and meant to love and live.

Amen