

Matthew 7:1-5, 12

Life Together

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*Title Slide-Life Together

This morning we continue our look at Matthew's Sermon on the Mount which contains examples of and instructions for Jesus-followers who were experiencing life together and trying to live into Jesus' vision of what God's empire would be like, even as they were surrounded by the empire of Rome.

The instructions in this little section of Matthew are fairly well-known, often quoted by Christians, so I thought this would be a good day for a pop quiz...with prizes!

*What does Jesus tell us to take out of our eyes?

- a. Speck of dust
- b. Log
- c. Eyelash

*MATTHEW 7:5. Take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

*Jesus says not to give pearls to

- a. Pigs
- b. Little girls
- c. Brides at a wedding

*MATTHEW 7:6. Don't throw your pearls in front of pigs.

*Jesus says that if we seek then we will

- a. Get lost
- b. Find

c. Get rich

*MATTHEW 7:7. Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

*Matthew 7:12 is a verse that we sometimes call

- a. The Golden Rule
- b. The Great Commandment
- c. The Shortest Parable

*MATTHEW 7:12. In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.

Jesus tells us to enter through a gate that is

- a. Wide
- b. Hidden
- c. Narrow

*MATTHEW 7:13. Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction.

*What happens to a tree that does not give good fruit?

- a. It is cut down
- b. It dries up
- c. It should be transplanted

*MATTHEW 7:19. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

*The foolish man built his house

- a. In a forest
- b. On rock
- c. On sand

*MATTHEW 7:26. Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

*When Jesus taught the crowds they were

- a. Angry
- b. Bored
- c. Amazed

*MATTHEW 7:28. When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were amazed at his teaching.

In Matthew 7:1, Jesus tells us not to

- a. Be lazy
- b. Judge others
- c. Run with scissors

*MATTHEW 7:1. Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.

That's a lot. So, I had to make a choice about which of these gems to preach on because time doesn't allow me to talk about all of them. I chose chapter 7, verses 1-5 and verse 12.

*1 "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. 2 For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. 3 Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

12 "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

“Do not judge.” There are two contexts in which I hear the word judge often. The first is the phrase, “Don’t judge me,” said usually before a story about the person’s perhaps questionable actions, like, “Don’t judge me because I used my entire day’s Weight Watchers points on candy.” Or, “Don’t judge me because I’m in my pajamas by 6 pm.”

The other context in which I encounter the word judgment is when people talk about why they don’t go to church. Almost always, the conversation turns to a time when they have felt unfairly judged by people who go to church and identify as Christians. Rather than endure their judgement, people choose not to have anything to do with church. And I understand it. We’ve heard that before, right?

So, in an effort to combat that, good ministers, like myself, say to their congregations, “Jesus taught us not to judge, so stop it.” The problem with that is life is full of *necessary* judgments. We judge the people we trust with our children, the people we trust with our health, and the people we trust with our hearts. We judge situations...is it scary, will it be too cold, too hot, too loud. Judging is a way of keeping ourselves and the people we love safe. Additionally, in the chapter right before this, Jesus himself judged synagogue practices, prayer habits, and lives focused on material goods. So, what are we to do? Ignore this instruction since Jesus clearly didn’t follow it himself?

Let’s try a more precise definition of the verb translated in English as “judge.” This particular word is better understood in terms of eschatological judgment or plainly, condemning someone to hell or “eternal” separation from God. This instruction isn’t about assessing someone’s character before entrusting them with your child. It’s a stern warning against declaring someone outside of God’s reach. Dr. Warren Carter, New Testament Professor at Phillips Theological Seminary, in his commentary on this passage, encourages us to read the word

condemn, rather than judge, suggesting the saying is really more like, “Do not go on condemning to hell.” He writes, “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.”

*Dr. Carter goes on to say, “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.”

I would add, if we think about it, if God really does deny mercy to our neighbors for this offense or that, we can probably guarantee God will deny mercy to us as well. That’s not the way the God I serve behaves. This passage calls us to consider our own role and our own actions in a situation, rather than being hyper aware of what others do. This command invites us to consider whether we rely on our faith to govern our own actions or the actions of others. It is not meant to forbid us from judging injustices or to discourage us from calling out systems, situations, and even people perpetuating injustice or endangering others. It is meant to compel us to stop and first ask, “What is my role here?” “What is my responsibility?”

And I think these questions transition nicely into talking about verse 12, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” We call it the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule is the climax and conclusion of this list of directives for life together. Though spoken initially to Matthew’s community, addressing relationship within that community, this final instruction should not be limited, but is meant to extend to all human beings. You may have noticed the front of your bulletin where there are examples of the same idea from other traditions. As you can see, the Golden Rule is not an exclusively Christian piece of wisdom or directive. For Christians, though, what is distinctive is that this verse has a number of parallels in

the Hebrew Bible, most notably, the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

The wisdom of the Golden Rule is especially important for us today. In the midst of division over any number of social issues and differences of opinion, we are reminded there are things that can bring all of us together. The idea that we should treat our neighbors with compassion, kindness, and love is one of those things. The wisdom of the Golden Rule is not only part of all major religious belief systems, it is a component of almost every ethical tradition and does not require followers to believe in a higher power at all. I have always been very interested in what holds communities, faith communities and other communities, together. Some faith communities are held together by a very rigid set of beliefs and practices. You believe this or you don't belong here. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and specifically this congregation, is not held together in that way.

If not held together by a common creed or doctrine, what then? We are held together by a common purpose. Our purpose is the same today as it was in Jesus' day and in the author of Matthew's day: to bring about the kin-dom (kingdom, empire) of God. What I find fascinating is that often we lose sight of our true purpose because we are too busy focusing on the things on which we will never agree. We will never all agree on theology, worship style, or any number of other things, but we can agree on our purpose as followers of Jesus, doing the work of repairing a broken world. The job of the church is to gather people together...all kinds of people who want to be part of bringing about the kind of world Jesus talked about.

Let's dream about that! What can we do to gather people, not on the basis of their theology, but based on what kind of world they (and we) want to create for ourselves, for our children, and our grand-children? One of our core values is hospitality. How might we extend hospitality

and belonging to our neighbors who don't identify as Christian, but who want the same kind of world we want? How would a community of people laser-focused on purpose, rather than doctrine look and act? These are the questions that keep me awake at night, that spark my imagination.

Lately, I've been spending time thinking about ministry---the parts that bring me life and the parts that suck the life out of me. I've realized that spaces where diversity of thought and belief are embraced are incredibly life-giving to me.

*One of the times I experienced deep joy and connection with God was during an interfaith service that the church I served in IL hosted. A Hindu priest sung the call to worship. An imam and a Baptist minister shared the sermon time. My friend, Rebecca, a rabbi, offered a prayer, and I got to welcome people and give the benediction. As I sat there, listening to different ways of praying, different ways of thinking about the Holy, and our common dreams for the world, I was overwhelmed with love and with the feeling that God was saying to us, "Yes, now you understand...this is what I intended for you and for the world." In my heart, I imagine this is what the kin-dom of God is like and I this church to be the kind of church that is willing to do whatever it takes to being glimpses of that to the world.

Today end out time devoted to the Sermon on the Mount. I will close with a colleague's adaptation of the Lord's Prayer. In it, he imagines a vision of the kingdom of God that will perhaps inspire us for our work together.

Our Lord's Prayer, adapted by Rev. Matthias Peterson-Brandt.

Father of the forgotten, Mother of the miscarried, Adopter of the orphan,
You who whisper our names, saying "yes, you belong"

May our palms grow calloused from laying the bricks of your kingdom

May our backs ache from carting wheelbarrows full of love

May our arms grow strong from mixing batch after batch of grace.

May we sweat peace and drink from the well of compassion, resting
when we are weary under the shade of fragrant trees.

Lead us into vulnerability, to thin places where our defensiveness is
disarmed,

where our charming white picket fences give way to lawns' lines
blurred

into an endless welcoming parkway of beckoning grass.

Let the paths before us lead us to your home, however unlikely they
may seem -

- unpaved, dirty, smelling of wood fires, trash fires,

- paths open to the wind, small houses with laundry hung to dry on the
edge of fields.

- paths we'd never expect

For such is your kingdom; growing slowly up through the soil against all
odds.

For such is your power like that of a janitor, mopping late into the night,
unseen, passionate, patient

For such is your glory, the applause of heavy rain, the satisfying
laughter of echoing thunder, threads of lightning stitching together
earth and sky, and us to one another,

and all that is your faithful constant presence. Amen.