

Judgmental Hypocrites?

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One day in the South Pacific, a navy ship Captain saw smoke coming from a hut on an uncharted island. When the crew arrived on the island they were met by a shipwreck survivor. He said, "I'm so glad you're here! I've been alone on this island for more than five years!" The captain replied, "If you're all alone on the island why do I see THREE huts." The survivor said, "Oh. Well, I live in one, and go to church in another." "What about the THIRD hut?" asked the captain. "That's where I used to go to church."

In a light-hearted way this joke highlights the reality of church life in our time. These days, people church shop and even build their own churches if conflicts arise or people become dissatisfied somehow with their church homes. If people feel that their spiritual and emotional needs are not met, they simply move on—to a different church or denomination, or even faith tradition entirely. Most of us this morning probably fall into this category, actually. We in modern times worship how we want and where we want.

Maybe this isn't always a bad thing, but it's interesting to think that people didn't always have this option in the history of Christianity. When the early church was just getting started and persecutions happened throughout the Roman Empire, Christians had to stick together in order to survive. There was great diversity of belief--that's why Paul constantly has lengthy theological discourses in his letters. But you couldn't get mad and necessarily go to the house church across the street enraged at people who didn't believe and practice the same way as you. You actually had to sit down and work it out.

Perhaps it's inevitable, but it seems that when people gather together in communities, conflict arises. Peter Steinke (Stein-key), the noted congregational systems consultant, explored many instances of people grumbling and speaking against others in scripture. He concludes by noting, "The Israelites, the Hellenists, the Pharisees, and the disciples prefigure the murmurers in the contemporary church. Grumbling is apparently endemic to human beings and, among some, epidemic. Put people together and inevitably someone will express contrariness."

This is exactly what Paul faces when he immerses himself in early Christian communities. But what's so interesting about today's scripture from Romans 14 is that Paul didn't found the church in Rome and hadn't even visited the church when he wrote the letter. His letter is mostly theological and attempts to explain his position on certain matters. So the scripture we heard today is Paul laying out his positions on judgment and community in a general way, probably taken from his experience in other Christian communities.

Because let's face it, we all have moments where we are really quick to judge other people. The heading for today's passage is simply, "Do Not Judge Another." That's it! In the case of the Roman Church, judgments were presumably made based on how people were observing the faith, including dietary restrictions and special days. As Paul says, "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions." How welcoming is it, after all, to join a new faith community only to be ridiculed for what you believe and the way you observe your faith in God. That's why Paul says, "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? . . . Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?"

Barbara Brown Taylor speaks to this very issue in her book *The Preaching Life*. She talks about serving as one of the priests at a large Episcopal Church in inner city Atlanta and encountering a man who worshipped like she had never really experienced before. The church was purposefully left open from nine to five each day and provided sanctuary for people in the

neighborhood—all kinds of people, so a camera was installed to monitor what was going on in the sanctuary from the church office.

A man appeared one day and laid face down on the altar steps and the secretary observed him there in this position for hours. After conferring with the priests and the staff about what to do, a staff member approached the man to ask if he was alright and the man simply replied that he was praying.

This went on for days—literally the sexton cleaned around him and the florist had to step over him to place the flowers on the altar come Sunday morning. Taylor was to preside at the communion service that day and so she reluctantly approached the man and explained that the church service would begin in a few minutes and that he was unfortunately blocking the altar for people to come up and receive communion. Thus, he needed to move. His response was simply, "That's okay" and he walked out the sanctuary doors, never to return.

Reflecting on the man and contrasting his way of worship with the well-ordered service that took place after his show of faith all week, she writes, "We were good servants, careful and contrite sinners who had come for our ritual cleansing, but one of us was missing. The foreigner was no longer among us; he had risen and gone his way, but the place where he lay on his face for hours—making a spectacle of himself—seemed all at once so full of heat and light that I stepped around it on my way out, chastened if only for that moment by the call to a love so excessive, so disturbing, so beyond the call to obedience that it made me want to leave all my good works behind."

So was the man a crazy lunatic? A modern-day prophet? A person who may have sinned and needed the safe space provided by that church sanctuary to bare his soul to God? We'll never know.

But this is the kind of person we are called not to judge. This is the kind of perhaps out there, zealous, crazy faith practice that we are called not to judge. And it's hard; it's so hard not to do so. And I think that's why Paul had this preemptive warning to the Romans. He didn't even know them, he didn't know their story, he didn't even know what kind of conflict, if any, the church community faced. But he knew that people are different, that people worship differently, that people believe differently, and that when you gather people together, there are bound to be some people who are just plain judgmental, whether they are church folk or as secular as they come.

I always find it interesting when people find out I'm a minister and then comment on the church. One of my favorite comments is, "Well I don't go to church because it's full of a bunch of judgmental, hypocritical people, no offense." Now we may hear that and get a bit self-righteous. We may get defensive and defend our honor, defend the church, defend our congregations as being models of all that is right and true and good with organized religion. I have certainly had the compulsion to do that, I'll admit.

But I think these arguments will not very often convince people who are leery of organized religion as an institution. Because maybe they have been judged by faith communities, maybe they have been made to feel unwelcome or foreign or odd or strange or like they're just not one of us.

The best response I've ever heard to this comment on the judgment and hypocrisy apparently so present in churches is, "The church is full of hypocrites and judgmental people? Well, there's always room for one more." Because if we're really honest with ourselves, we'll admit that there's times that we resemble the self-righteous religious folk Jesus often got into sparring matches with a whole lot more than we resemble the widow with her mite, or the tenth

leper who came back to thank Jesus after he was healed, or the people who "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

Do we have moments of being hypocritical? Yes. Do we have moments where we're judgmental of other people? Yes. Do we strive to constantly overcome these bad compulsions and can our faith in Jesus Christ and our involvement in this church help us do it? Yes!

Lillian Daniel, a UCC minister in Chicago just wrote about this in the UCC Still Speaking Devotional last week. In a divisive devotional she says that she gets really sick of people who say they're spiritual but not religious. And what she goes on to say is, "Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself."

Community is so important when it comes to faith. It's okay to worship by yourself and have your own individual devotional practices, just like that man in the sanctuary in Atlanta. But when you separate yourself from a community, it's pretty difficult to practice your religion because don't you need other people to love as God first loved us? What if that man had stuck around and worshipped with the congregation that morning—would the story have ended a little differently? Because whether we like it or not, being with people who may see things differently than us—well, that can challenge us and push us and make us grow as people of faith.

So as happy as I am that we live in a culture where we have choices when it comes to religion and faith practices, I also hope that you stick with us and with one another even if there's a bump in the road. I hope that you come to worship to hear the good news in community and question the ideas that may not sit well with you. For as Barbara Brown Taylor says, "In this age of a million choices, we are the remnant, the sometimes faithful, sometimes unfaithful family of a difficult and glorious God, called to seek and proclaim God's presence in a disillusioned world." So welcome back to our regular church year and we'll hopefully see a lot more of each other coming up. And thanks be to God for that, Amen.