

Today we jump backward significantly in the narrative of Jesus. Back in February, before Lent began, we spent two weeks discussing the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. And then we flew through Lent and Holy Week and Easter and Pentecost and now, it's June! But we never finished talking about the Sermon on the Mount, so let's get back into it.

Now, before I go on, I want to make a distinction. We call these three chapters of Matthew *the* Sermon on the Mount, but in reality, scholars do not believe that Jesus said everything from Matthew 5 through Matthew 7 in one long sermon. Even Jesus knew that you all get restless if sermons go on for more than 20 minutes at a time. It's more likely, particularly pertaining to these verses we're talking about today, that Matthew put many sayings that he remembered from separate occasions together in this section of his writing.

So, let's take our reading piece by piece today.

Jesus said, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. <sup>2</sup> For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. <sup>3</sup> Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> 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? <sup>5</sup> 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."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This may be a familiar piece of scripture to you. It's a good visual of what hypocrisy looks like, isn't it? Ignoring the struggle you have, while pointing out and suggesting that you can fix a smaller version of the problem in someone else.

But, like most things, the English translation, "do not judge," leaves us a bit short of the original intention. *Judgment* in and of itself is not evil. The average American adult makes 35,000 judgments every day – from whether or not to get out of bed to what clothes to wear and what to eat and whether or not it's safe to change lanes or turn left. We make judgments constantly.

But Professor Warren Carter writes, “The [Greek] verb employed here commonly designates eschatological judgment or condemning someone to hell suggesting a translation of “Do not go on condemning to hell.”

This translation addresses various situations, [he says, in which] people can write others off as beyond redemption, outside God’s grace. . . . 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.”

Let me say that again. Followers of Jesus have no right to declare that someone is beyond God’s mercy. Do not assume anyone is a lost cause. Do not give up hope that God can redeem and restore even the most unlikely people.

That’s the first bit of today’s sermon. Now, the second part of today’s reading is an unusual one. “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.”

This is the unusual word of the Lord.           **Thanks be to God.**

You may be really confused by this passage. I was for a very long time. But don’t be distracted by the animals in this verse. Because some of us do give what is holy to dogs. We give them comfortable beds and the best care and we spoil our beloved four-legged babies. And someone at our church has had a pet pig before, too. A live-inside-the-house pig. But we’re not talking about sweet house pets or even petting zoo creatures. Scholars say that the dogs and pigs in this scripture are not domesticated pets but feral (meaning wild), aggressive creatures that can hurt you. And on top of that, Jesus isn’t actually talking about literal dogs and pigs. He’s symbolically talking about humans that are as aggressive and dangerous as wild animals. He’s saying, don’t give what is precious to people who could turn around and harm you.

But wait, didn’t Jesus just say, do not condemn anyone? That no one is beyond God’s mercy? Well, yes. Sometimes the Bible has these statements that seem to contradict each other. Jesus is saying in the first statement, don’t condemn anyone as beyond God’s love, but, in the second statement, use discernment. Be careful, and don’t endanger yourself by trying to share

something with someone who is hostile. Or waste your valuable time and resources on such a risky bet.

Remember, the average adult makes over 35,000 judgments a day. Jesus himself is saying, it's ok to be aware of your environment, read a room, determine risk. These are not contradictory sayings of Jesus. They are complimentary. Don't condemn, love your enemies even, but be mindful of danger. Don't throw your pearls to the pigs who might trample them and maul you.

Our third Jesus statement today is our longest one: <sup>7</sup>“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>9</sup>Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if the child asked for a fish, would give a snake? <sup>11</sup>If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

Now, most of us know this one, and we may have mixed feelings about it. Some preachers tell you to “name it and claim it.” The way it reads, we get to name our requests and God will grant our wishes like a Disney movie genie. I pray, “God, let the San Antonio Spurs win the NBA Finals,” but I know that some of you are out there praying for the Knicks. And God bless you, but no.

If I'm praying for God to bless the Spurs, and you're praying for God to bless the Knickerbockers, then one of us is going to feel like our prayer is unanswered. Even worse than just unanswered, the opposite will happen, and we're left frustrated or confused or angry; questioning if God hears us or cares about us or has the power to do anything at all anymore.

Don't take my word for it. The folks at Bible study on Wednesday spoke about claiming this verse and praying their hearts out for particular things and the people they loved. Not just about basketball games but about their loved one's health. They said that they prayed believing that their faith and prayers would result in the outcomes they desired, but when circumstances worked out in ways they did not pray for, they were angry - at God. One said, “I kept coming to

church, and I kept singing the hymns, but on the inside, I was so mad. I wasn't worshipping God. I was fuming at God."

And that's all to do with our translation from Greek to English and our interpretation of it. Rev. Dr. David Instone-Brewer writes, "we have misunderstood Jesus' teaching in these verses and his apparent promise that God will give us whatever we want. In English, when we read these verses, we stress the words "will receive, will find, will be opened" [words of confident assurance]; however, the emphasis in Greek was different."

"In the original text," he says, "they do not convey certainty."

What Reverend Instone-Brewer says is that the emphasis Jesus was making was to pray, to have dialogue with God, to let God know what it was you hoped for, then to have faith that God is, above all, loving, and to remember what Jesus pointed out in the previous chapter: God knows what you need before you even ask.

Jesus was not promising that God would do exactly what we asked but promising that communicating with God would bring us closer to God and reveal God's love for us.

And Jesus taught us how to pray in that way. For example, prayer that can always be answered by God is prayer for peace regardless of outcome, love regardless of hate, trust regardless of uncertainty. We can pray for God's mercy. We can pray for determination, strength, and compassion. We can pray for wisdom and skill. Those are prayers that God can always respond to.

Now, we can be honest with God and say, "I want this outcome. I want this miracle. I want more time." It's just honest to say how we feel. But more importantly we can say, "I believe you love me, and I believe you love the person I'm praying for. And I believe that no matter what happens, in life, in death, and in life beyond death, we are not alone. Your love will provide."

And friends, if God doesn't give us what we want, it's not because God doesn't care about our request or have the ability to do what we want. Does that make sense to you? God loves you. God does not give your loved ones cancer or a degenerative neurological disease or a

mental health problem. But God wants to be near you and near them and pour out all the love that you can handle as you handle the situation. Amen?

And then, finally, we have the last saying for today, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

I don’t need to expand on this one. You know it. You’ve heard it. But can you live it? If you did it; if we did it; if everyone on earth took this spiritual teaching to heart through their own religious tradition, no one would ever be abused or go hungry or be unhoused or pull a trigger or launch a missile or judge according to orientation or ethnicity or primary language, or diagnosis.

The Sermon on the Mount is a remarkable set of instructions from Jesus himself. We need to spend more time immersed in what he had to say, but we are so easily distracted. Rev. Dr. Robin R. Meyers writes in his book, *Saving God from Religion*, “Consider this remarkable fact: in the Sermon on the Mount, there is not a single word about what to believe, only words about what to do, [how to pray], and how to be. By the time that the Nicene Creed is written, only three centuries later, there is not a single word in *it* about what to do and how to be – only words about what to believe.” Let’s get back to doing and being known for our behavior, our love, our compassion, not our judgment of others. Let’s pray in such a way that God can always respond with love. Let’s follow the Golden Rule. Let’s preach the gospel at all times, and only, when necessary, use words. Amen.