

## CRITICIZING...WARNING...JUDGING

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
September 16, 1984 Romans 14:7-13

We are dealing with a sensitive area today. Last week we discussed "alive." I gave an example of how our church is alive and well. Today, we have an additional example. Janet Sweet was thrilled to announce that in recruiting for a particular task in the Fall Finance Campaign, seven out of seven persons contacted accepted! We are defining "live" as Love Is Vital Energy. Love is a misunderstood command. We are called to love, but not to let others walk all over us. We are called to warn, to express concern for others, but not to judge or criticize.

In my Christian experience in the church, I find that we get these all mixed up. Some Christians think they are called to be moral judges, watchdogs, judging, indicting, even sentencing. Others react to the judgment stance by going to the other extreme. They want to be loving, rather than judging, so they overlook, take no stands, allow themselves to be used, manipulated and exploited. They feel they are loving and forgiving. Somewhere between the two extremes of judging and wishy-washy loving is the Christian stance of love.

The key is perhaps in the challenge: Respond, don't react. That is a good word for parents. When the children manipulate you into waiting on them, or getting you angry, don't react. Don't react by waiting on them. Or, don't react by getting angry, which is what they wanted you to do, so they could win. Stop: don't react, but respond. When you are upset or hurt by what someone has said or done, stop: don't react in anger, or don't react in self-pity, don't criticize or judge; but, respond!

Don't react; don't judge others, do not criticize. Jesus is quite emphatic: "Judge not, lest you be judged." There is a boomerang effect when you judge. Matthew 7:1, "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get back." In our Epistle lesson this morning, Paul emphasized in Romans 14:10, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother?...For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God." Judgment has a boomerang effect. Our judgments come right back on us by revealing our own shortcomings. The habit of judging others tends to reveal about us that unattractive character flaw, self-righteousness. To judge others is to say in effect, "I must be good; look at all the bad I can find in others!"

It is very tempting for church persons to fall into the pit of self-righteousness and pronounce judgments on others, criticizing them for inferior behavior. We have that reputation. Paul Tournier says it is through fear of being judged that many people absent themselves from the church. "Rightly or wrongly," he writes, "they invest the parson with a spirit of judgment which they fear." Countless people who have gone through divorce or some other life-wrenching experience with moral overtones have quit the church because the people were judgmental. They deny themselves the healing ministry of the church because of their fear they will be judged. A woman in Fay Weldon's book, Female Friends, expresses relief that her mother has died, saying that now there is one less pair of eyes to judge her.

Few of us like to be judged. A United Methodist minister, unhappy with the appointment system, left the conference to be a minister in a church with a congregational form of polity. Soon he came back to the conference to ask for reinstatement. He said, "I would rather be appointed to a church once a year than to have a group of old critics vote on me every prayer-meeting night." We don't like to be judged ourselves; why do we judge others?

Clarence Hall, in an article "The Art of Understanding Others," writes:

One of the richest hours of my life was spent recently in the company of a woman who had just turned 80. Though she had been buffeted by what seemed more than her share of ill fortune, Miss Emily has created more happiness for herself and her neighbors than anyone else I've known. For years her humble home was a refuge for the troubled in heart. I asked the secret of her serenity, and she replied, "I found it when I overcame the bad habit of judging others."

How do you overcome the bad habit of judging and criticizing others? Don't react, but respond.

Respond, first, by assuming the best. Put the best connotation on the other person's behavior, not the worst. Don't react by assuming the worst, but make a conscious attempt to respond by assuming the best. Try to understand. Look at the wider picture. A lecturer taped a square of white paper on a blackboard. Then he made a tiny black dot in the center of the white paper. Asked what they saw, all present replied, "A black dot." The lecturer asked, "Don't any of you see a large square of white?" Develop the habit of seeing the larger picture, not just the one dot, not just the mistake, the failing. Isn't it unfair how the media, how the gossips, let one mistake, one failing, one "dot" erase or obliterate the good a person has accomplished?

Assume the best when a person breaks a rule, or says something that hurts, or makes a mistake. During a break in a long conference committee meeting, I was standing with a small group of persons who were criticizing a young adult. This young adult woman, quite overweight, was chewing gum, loudly and boisterously throughout the meeting. The small group just thought it was terrible of the girl--how rude, how impolite--until I said, "What you people don't know is that girl is fighting a weight problem. She has tried every diet possible, and is now on a particularly restricted diet. She is so hungry that one of the ways she keeps her mind off her hunger is to chew gum." How easy it is to judge and criticize. Make an effort to get the wider picture. Assume the best.

Respond, secondly, by looking at others, by trying to understand others, as God looks at you, as God understands you. Realize, as Paul states, you are also under the judgment of God. Consider how merciful God is with you, how tolerant, how patient, how understanding. In our Gospel lesson this morning, Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus told the parable of how the king forgave the debt of a servant who could not pay. When the servant went right out to one of his debtors, demanded that the man pay, and threw him into debtor's prison when he could not, the king changed his mind and threw the servant into prison. The king said, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me, and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" Don't react; respond by assuming the best and seek to be merciful as God is merciful to you.

Thirdly, respond by acting, rather than reacting. Love, as commanded by Jesus, is primarily an action. "Do to others," he commanded. The original Henry Ford wrote in his diary one day, "Don't find fault, find a remedy." Look for an opportunity to contribute to a person's growth. Last week I shared with you the definition of love given by Dr. M. Scott Peck in his book, The Road Less Traveled. "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."

That definition is compatible and illustrative of the biblical perspective. Love is an action in which you put yourself out, you make an effort, you try to contribute to a person's spiritual growth.

Using the criterion of "spiritual growth" exemplified and defined by Jesus, make a decision to warn. Warning or confronting as Jesus told us to do to each other when there has been a wrong, is not only expected of us, but commanded as an outreach of love. To love someone is to act on their behalf so that they may grow into the person Jesus calls them to become. Love does not mean that you allow someone to exploit or manipulate or walk on you. That is not contributory to their spiritual growth, nor to your self-respect. Because you are concerned for their spiritual growth, you are to confront others, warn others of the path they are taking, and of the violation such behavior does to their own development.

A minister friend of mine chose in love to confront a young man in his church who was making long distance calls on the church phone, lying about it, and doing such other detrimental behavior. The minister could have chosen to ignore the behavior. That's the easy cop-out, but it is not loving. My friend wrote the following letter to the young man.

This is a serious and important violation of trust on your part. I am deeply distressed by your behavior...You will be held responsible for all calls you have made...If you decide not to comply, I am prepared to consult with an attorney.

In his next letter, after the young man responded by promising to pay the phone bills, the minister explained,

I'm concerned that without professional help you will continue to block out that part of you which is the "con," and you will fail to grow into the person I believe you can be. Your repeated behavior of manipulating, controlling and attempting to use people is of deep concern to me. You evade responsibility, escape into activities that distance you from people, and then blame others for your failures. When you make agreements, you break them without acknowledging your responsibility. In meetings you do not listen or respond to what is being said to you.

Some may think that was a harsh treatment of a young man. I call it "love." The minister loves the young man and is willing to put himself out, to extend himself for the purpose of nurturing the young man's spiritual growth. Probably few persons have ever confronted the young man with his behavior. The parents didn't. They continually allowed their son to manipulate them. The son was rapidly on his way to becoming an irresponsible adult. He has now been warned. He has now been apprised of what his behavior is doing. He has now been loved.

The difference between warning or confronting and judging is that warning is done in love, out of concern for the individual; while judging is done in self-righteousness and in condemnation of the individual. Warning or confronting in love opens communication. Judging and criticizing closes communication.

Beloved, let us not judge one another, but assume the best, expect the best, remembering how God is merciful to you; and let us love one another.

*Doug*

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