

September 17, 2017

TEXT: Romans 14:1–12

TITLE: Judging Judgments

Romans 14 opens with a great line: *Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.* The apostle Paul sounds like such a “dad” in that moment—“Welcome those who are weak, but not just so you can pick on them. Be nice to your little brother and sister, but don’t take advantage of them or quarrel with them.” It is such a universal family reality: One minute everyone is playing nicely and the next minute they’re arguing and fighting and saying “But he started it! She started it!”

When Paul wrote this letter, he had not yet met the Christians in Rome. This letter is a letter of introduction. He is telling a bit about his own story—how he had done much that was wrong, how he had persecuted the followers of Jesus, and how he was called to serve both Jews and Gentiles, establishing churches that brought together all sorts of people. In chapter 12 and 13, Paul gives all sorts of ethical advice—telling them to love one another, to bless those who curse them, not to repay anyone evil for evil, but to live peaceably with all. Then in [chapter 14](#) he gives them a specific example. Paul asks why they are quarreling over old purity laws about which foods to eat or not eat, or fighting over which days certain rituals need to be done. The parent Paul asks point-blank: *Who are you to pass judgment on one another?* Hearing this you can bet the children in the church of Rome, and possibly like the children here in the church of Pittsburgh, may have bowed their heads in shame even as they whispered under their breath, “But they started it!” There is nothing new under the sun. Human beings of old are just like human beings today—which is why the scripture of old still speaks to us today.

Passing judgments about others, in truth, is a survival skill we’ve evolved over the centuries. From our earliest days, humans have had to size up strangers in a few seconds: Is this a friend or foe? Can I trust them or not? We all pass judgments—deciding whom to trust, whom to believe. Sometimes these judgments are based on valid experiences. Sometimes they are based on prejudices, superficial appearances, and unconscious bias.

Warren G. Harding was a quiet newspaper editor from the small town of Marion, Ohio. He was elected to the state senate, largely because he had one special quality: he looked great! He had classic facial features, a gracious demeanor, good hair and a great voice. He rose from one office to the next, even though he was not particularly intelligent; he drank, chased women and had no political agenda. Pushed by others and aided by his good looks, so many people judged Harding to be presidential that he was elected to that office in 1920—and universally has been considered one of the worst presidents in American history.¹

Judgments are shaped by our overall experiences; therefore if we wish to change our judgments, we need to adjust or expand our experiences. This has been scientifically proven to be possible. There is something called “priming” that affects how all of us make decisions. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman tells about an experiment in which students are put in one room, given a list of five word clusters and asked to make sentences using the words in each group. Once done, they were to walk down the hallway to a second room and do another test. However the real experiment was that a researcher secretly measured how long it took the students to walk down the hallway. Those who had words associated with old age mixed into their vocabulary lists—words like worried, old, lonely, wrinkled, and bingo—walked significantly slower than those who didn’t have those words on their sheets. Scientists call this “the Florida effect.” In another experiment, students were given a bunch of trivia questions to answer and some were asked to first spend five minutes writing about what it meant to be a college professor and others were asked to write about soccer hooligans. The ones who were primed by thinking about college professors weren’t smarter than the others, but they correctly answered significantly more trivia questions.²

Now, priming and snap judgments become quite serious when the result of them affects how we treat someone who is different from us. Psychologists can measure how prone we are to associate certain careers with men rather than women, or to attribute certain positive qualities with Caucasian people versus people of other races. These prejudices are active within all of us on an unconscious level. But just like the students who were primed to think about professors, our judgments become measurably less racially prejudiced if we first think of Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, or Serena Williams. Change your experiences—change your mental images—and you’ll change how you think and judge others.

This is not rocket science. It is just common sense that the broader our experiences, the more balanced and just our judgments will be. This conclusion is reinforced by countless examples from Jesus’ ministry. Jesus was constantly priming his disciples to change their prejudices and act with loving kindness toward others. He invited a leper into their midst, spoke with, touched and healed this outcast so they’d never see lepers the same way again. Jesus stopped a huge crowd to speak with a woman considered unclean due to her menstrual blood flow; he talked with a grieving Roman centurion whose daughter was dying and with a despised tax collector perched in a sycamore tree. Snap judgments and prejudice are all that these people had known over the years; and prejudicial judgments are what the disciples would have quickly, unthinkingly shown them as well—until Jesus changed them. He expanded their experiences. He primed them to see differently—to love as He loved. To judge their judgments thenceforth by the example of His own mercy and grace.

The apostle Paul is doing some of this same work in his letter to the Romans. He hasn’t met them yet but he knows the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians

are fighting over dietary laws—about whether you can eat meat, since it might have been prepared wrong or tied to the worship of false gods. Perhaps one should just avoid the risk altogether and only eat vegetables. Paul doesn't take sides in this argument but challenges them to judge their judgments in light of their faith in God, who is Lord of meat-eaters and vegetarians, Romans and Greeks alike. Those who eat meat and those who abstain both do so out of their understanding of how best to honor God. Paul writes them this humbling reminder: *Look, if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.* That is true of us and true of those different from us. We are all the Lord's. Period.

Today is Visitor's Sunday and a good number of you here today are new to our church. Welcome! Now forgive me as I tell you something startling: If you've come here to find music you like and sermons that are soothing and people who agree with everything you already believe, you've come to the wrong church. If, on any given Sunday here at ELPC, you do not hear something different from the usual church talk—or hear something that challenges what you normally think or believe—then we have not done our ministry faithfully and with true integrity. In the same way, to congregation members and friends: If your time today is only spent interacting with people you already know, or more seriously, people who look like you, sit near you, and are roughly your same age and economic category, then you've wasted a Sunday morning. Most of our life during the week primes us not to reach out to strangers and to make snap judgments based on appearances and prejudices. In Christ we have been given a new commandment—to love one another as Christ has loved us. To love in Christ's way requires seeing in Christ's way as well. Weak in faith, different in faith, needy, hurting, strong, confident, old, young, whatever—their stories are now part of our stories and vice versa. In Christ we are primed to see differently and live together unconditionally. Our prayer this morning and every morning is like the first verse from the old hymn: *Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me; open my eyes, illumine me, spirit divine.*

Judge not. For how do the weak and strong live together in faith today? Easy—by not assuming we're one or the other, just as we are not to assume those around us are one or the other. Ultimately who they are and who we are is the same: We are the Lord's.

AMEN

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, Blink, 2005, pp. 72-75.

² Ibid., pp. 52-56; also Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, 2011, pp. 52-54.