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Date: August 29, 2021
Sermon: "UN O IDS"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 7:1-5

Matthew 7:1-5

Judging Others

'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? 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? 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 sermon isn't so much about "Cancel Culture" as it is about how not to be canceled, and especially how not to cancel ourselves! Christians, with Christian bumper stickers on their cars and lots of big religious stuff on their Facebook pages, who cheat at golf and abuse coworkers, shouldn't be surprised if your Christian religiosity isn't taken seriously. They've canceled their own message.

One of my favorite Bible verses and one of the toughest is "To be instant in and out of season." "To be instant," means to be on, to be fully 100 percent alert and involved. "To be instant in and out of season," means there is no off-season. Your piety, your faith, your religious evidence, your effort at being Christlike doesn't have a day off, a lunch break, a holiday, or a timeout. The message of your being should be always clear.

Young people have a word, "representing." It refers to things you should stand for, you want to be known for, that are important to you. It can be your school, your team, your favorite band or ski mountain or fashion brand. When people wear a promotional hat or a brand-name T-shirt, they're "representing."

We all have something we are “representing,” something we believe in, some message we want to get across. But things can get in the way, block out, confuse our message.

The Bible, like most of life, is filled with two kinds of people: people who stayed focused and people who got off track. Truth is, most of us are little bit of both. We focus, and then we lose focus. We have a message or a point or a plan, and then we lose sight of it.

St. Paul does a wonderful job of explaining such focus, clarity, using the language of athletics, especially running. And remember when I read these, he’s writing to Churches about being a good Church, a good Christian, a good person.

So Paul writes: “Run in such away as to get the prize. Do not run aimlessly (wandering all over).” (1 Corinthians 9:24-26)

“I’ve seen you! You were running a good race. But who cut in on you?” (Galatians 5:7)

“I press on, straining forward. I press on toward the goal to win the prize.” (Philippians 3:12-14)

And then, toward the end of his life, Paul proclaims: “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I can claim my prize.” (2 Timothy 4:7)

That’s a person who saw clearly what he wanted to accomplish *and* what he wanted others to see clearly that they should accomplish.

Driving down a Fairfield street recently, I saw a lawn sign that puzzled me: “UN O IDS.” I took a second look and then a third. “UN O IDS.” Finally, I got out of my car, walked around some shrubs to look closer. The sign actually said, “UNMASK OUR KIDS.” It’s been part of a movement in town to allow kids back in school without having to wear masks, but it was placed in such a way that whichever way you came upon it, trees and shrubs blocked enough of the message that you were left with “UN O IDS.”

That got me to wondering how many things in life, maybe things we believe in, stand for, things that are important or good or urgent—how many things get blocked by something getting in the way? Something obtrusive? Maybe not a tree or a shrub, but an attitude, a person, a comment, something extraneous.

This is why businesses and companies and products go crazy when one of their big-name spokespersons says something ugly or does something stupid. Maybe it’s racist. Maybe it’s vulgar. Maybe it’s sexist. Maybe it’s insensitive. And

suddenly that product or that movement gets associated and blocked by that connection.

Ben & Jerry's makes great ice cream. But now they won't let their ice cream be sold in the so-called "occupied territories" of Israel/Palestine. They've become part of the BDS movement—Boycott/Divest/Sanction movement against Israel. So . . . I love Ben & Jerry's. I am pro-Israel. I am against the boycott. And I'm against Israeli settlements.

Now, when I reach in the freezer department at the supermarket for my favorite Ben & Jerry's, I clutch. I halt. I question myself and my priorities and my ethics. It's confusing. Are Israel/Palestinian politics getting in the way of ice cream? Or is my ice cream getting in the way of my take on Israeli/Palestinian politics?

If I take a Ben & Jerry's, am I anti-Semitic? Or if I leave empty-handed, am I insensitive to Palestinian suffering? Or can it all boil down to whether or not I want a 1,200-calorie snack? Either way, what used to be clear, what needs to be clear, isn't.

Same with political causes and social causes, even sports teams and fun things. You don't want something blocking your message.

Our whole family just finished binge watching the new Netflix show, "The Chair," about a dwindling English department in a struggling college. Their most popular professor, in a brilliant lecture on "Absolutism and Fascism," makes a "Heil Hitler" arm motion. It's caught on camera on some student's iPhone, and it becomes a meme and a TikTok video, and in short order the professor is in trouble, labeled a Nazi. His message got muddled by an unexpected intrusion.

It doesn't matter that it was tongue-in-cheek or educational or humorous or absurdist. Such things may be innocuous or unintentional or misunderstood; or blatant and willful. The end result is same. The view is blocked. The perspective is skewed. You are not seen or heard or understood clearly. There is some shrubbery in the way.

One of Jesus's most popular and useful statements is this one: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye and pay no attention to the log in your own eye? First take the log out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to take the speck out of someone else's eye." (Matthew 7:3-5)

There are a couple of lessons there, but one point is simple: you need to see clearly. But there may be something in your own life that keeps you from seeing clearly. And you want to be seen clearly yourself. But something may keep others

from seeing you clearly. Or seeing clearly what you believe in, what you stand for, what you advocate.

So Jesus is telling us, "Clear away the shrubbery, remove the obstacles, let your true self be clear . . . and seen. Or place yourself in such a way that nothing gets in the way."

One of the more tragic stories in the Bible is about St. Steven. Steven was a wonderful guy, very spiritual, faithful, a born leader. That's why he was one of the very first Deacons chosen by the Disciples to help lead the Church at the beginning of Christianity.

And he was the first Christian martyr. *Martyr*. That means he was killed for his faith. But why? Well, I hate to put it this way, but he got killed because he was obnoxious, too pushy; he let his mouth and his passion clog up his message.

What happened was because he was such a popular Christian, the top religious leaders of Judaism wanted to talk to him. This was an amazing opportunity. He was sitting with people who really, really cared about religious ideas. Steven could have said, "Thank you for this opportunity to share. Let me put your minds at ease. We're on the same team. I'm Jewish. You're Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. So let me tell you about him. I'll tell you some of his stories. Jesus was a great storyteller, you know. And I'll give you some of his great sayings—a lot of them come from our own Scripture. And I'll show you how he was just the one we've all been waiting for."

Instead, he starts off with a long history lesson, a bit boring, weaves in a few negative comments about the Jewish religion, and ends by mocking, maligning, and insulting them crudely.

So they killed him. Presto! The first Christian martyr. We've all met people like Steven or been like Steven ourselves. People get all excited about some new idea, a new movement, a new leader. Or a new help, a new diet, a new plan. And in their excitement, they push, they cajole, they'll try to get you on board; and to do so they may go too far, get too pushy, too aggressive, too insulting, demanding. Too much shrubbery blocking their lawn signs.

Another example of this that pops up all the time is whether you are in favor of something or more opposed to something else. The end result is that people's opposition to something or someone can be so crass, so disconnected, that we totally lose sight of what they actually support.

Have you ever been to a Red Sox/Yankee game? The vulgarity toward the other team is so loud, you forget the good qualities of the team they're rooting for! To

put it simply about many things in our world—politics, sports, religion—are you a fan? Or just a hater? What’s more visible? Your lawn sign? Or your shrubbery?

So, remember how I opened the sermon with all those St. Paul quotes about running. For him, it was crystal clear: you have a clear goal, you keep your eyes focused, you don’t let anything get in the way, and you press forward. You finish strong.

To contemporize Paul, you are your own lawn sign. You want to be understood clearly. Don’t get obstructed. Whether it’s your Christian faith, your social causes, or your personal values, don’t let other stuff wipe out your message.

Get the log out of your own eye. See clearly yourself. Let others see you clearly the way you want to be seen.

Our final hymn today is “O Jesus, I Have Promised,” No. 612 in your Hymnal.

*O Jesus, I have promised
To serve thee to the end;
Be thou forever near me,
My Master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle
If thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
If thou wilt be my guide.*

*O let me feel thee near me!
The world is ever near:
I see the sights that dazzle,
The tempting sounds I hear.
My foes are ever near me,
Around me and within;
But, Jesus, draw thou nearer,
And shield my soul from sin.*

*O let me hear thee speaking
In accents clear and still,
Above the storms of passion,
The murmurs of self-will.
O speak to reassure me,
To hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
Thou guardian of my soul.*

*O Jesus, thou hast promised
To all who follow thee
That where thou art in glory
There shall thy servant be.
And, Jesus, I have promised
To serve thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow,
My Master and my friend.*