

“Do Not Judge”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 9, 2026

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Romans 2:1-4

Luke 6:32-38

Summer Worship Series: *A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love for God, our Neighbors, and Ourselves* - Week Ten

In many parts of the ancient world, it was a common practice to place a statue of the community's leader in the middle of the city, often near the central temple; not just to remind them of who was in charge, but also to encourage the people to imitate their leader. In Luke's gospel, Jesus draws on this same principle of imitation when he says that the community is to be merciful as God is merciful. For, as was revealed in Exodus 34, in a passage the Jewish people among his hearers would have known well, mercy is one of God's primary qualities.

On our first day at the seminar I attended last week, “Living the Scriptural Story,” we looked at the book, *Being God's Image*, by Carmen Joy Imes, its author and our teacher. Dr. Imes has spent much of the last fifteen years – starting with a doctoral thesis and in three subsequent books – to show that studying and knowing the story of the Old Testament is essential to our understanding the Good News of Jesus in the New Testament. And it is her contention that we were made not only in the image of God, but created to be God's image: to be living, breathing representatives of the grace and mercy, the steadfast love and faithfulness of God to the world.

Jesus, of course, is also the image – a concrete embodiment – of God, made in the same human form as we were, experiencing all the same things that we do in life, yet without sin. As followers of Christ, we look not upon statues, or idols of Jesus, but to his words and actions in the years he walked this earth. Jesus told us, and showed us, what was our most important task, as individuals and as a community: to love the Lord our God with our whole self and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

So, what gets in the way of us loving our neighbor? The first obstacle may be that we do not “see” others as God does. We tend to see them through a myriad of labels that categorize them in ways that allow us, instead, to dismiss, or feel superiority over, or resent, or even worship a bit. Whenever we look at someone, we

apply a value judgment in the first few seconds. It's almost impossible for us to imagine greeting a person or situation with a completely open mind and forming fair and gracious judgments after only a short interaction.

A college art student once asked his roommate Peter to model for a portrait assignment. After many hours of careful work, he submitted the painting, only to receive a grade of C-minus.

Devastated, he confronted his professor. "What's wrong with it?" The professor critiqued the proportions. "The head is too big," he said. "The shoulders are too wide. And those feet – way too enormous."

The next day, the student returned – not with a new painting, but with Peter himself.

The professor took one look at Peter and said, "Okay, I'll change your grade to an A-minus."¹

When Jesus tells us not to judge others – lest we, ourselves, be judged – it often confuses us. Many people believe that if we didn't judge anyone, we'd put ourselves in danger. But there is a difference between discernment and judgment. Discernment comes from listening to the voice of intuition inside of us; it allows us to assess that a certain person or situation is not safe and we should remove ourselves from it. Judging others separates us from one another, creating caricatures with no complexity, no depth, no humility. It is black and white; and it rarely has the ability to find the grey.

The flip side of judging others is that we get judged. There will be some people who can think of us only for the worst thing we said or did. There are others who will put us on a pedestal and then, how great the fall will be. *Those people*, we mutter with an eye roll. Our ability to hold space for each other, to probe underneath initial impressions or opinions, can be extremely low.²

Yet, the truth is, when we get to know the fullness of someone's story, we inevitably begin to feel more compassion for them. No one is born evil – as the quotation from the first chapter in Genesis reminds us – we are each made to be God's

¹ Alan Smith, "Alan Smith's Thought for the Day"

² Siri Stromann, *A Curriculum of Love*

image, a concrete representative of the divine, created to be gracious and merciful, as is our Lord, Jesus.

“If you love those who love you,” Jesus asks in verse 32, “what credit (or “what grace,” the word in Greek is *charis*, as in “charisma”) is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them.” The same is true, Jesus says, for doing good to those who do good to you, and for lending to those who lend to you. The implication is that anyone can love those who love them back, and anyone can lend to someone from whom they expect repayment; that kind of loving and lending is a transaction. You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.³

Jesus, of course, calls his followers to a higher standard. He knows our propensity to judge and condemn others; that powerful pull to rank people within a hierarchy, to attach a label of insider or outsider on them, and to fail to show proper grace. Jesus calls on us to love not just our neighbors, but our enemies, as well; and to realize that our snap judgments often cause us to confuse the two. And when we do give, without expecting to get anything back in return, we are reminded that it can actually be better to give than to receive.

Christians sometimes mistake the admonition to stop judging and condemning in verse 37 to mean that followers of Jesus should never make a moral judgment. Rather, the saying likely means that the church should not act like it knows the final verdict on those who oppose the ways of God. Human perception is always finite. Judgment rightfully belongs to God.⁴

Sometimes, this judgy-ness even shows up in the church. We can be quick to condescend when people do not show up in the “right” clothes or know to stand up at the “designated” times. Jesus was not afraid to call out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in his day who questioned healing on the Sabbath for not being done at the “right” time and in “designated” locations. He pointed out to them how easy it is to get hung up on little details while missing the big picture.

The image Jesus paints in the final verse comes from the marketplace and the sale of grain. The buyer will surely get her money’s worth (a full measure) pressed down and shaken together – in other words, what would fit in her own basket or the lap of her cloak. Judging others means that we are participating in a culture that

³ Mary Hinkle Shore from *WorkingPreacher.com*

⁴ Ronald Allen from *WorkingPreacher.com*

features premature and unfair judgment. In condemning others, we open ourselves up to being condemned based on the worst thing we have done, not according to the grace that God offers us.

In God's realm, according to Jesus, there is a different way. We can choose to shatter this cycle of judgment without grace; of condemnation without mercy. We can commit to loving our neighbors not based on the measure of the love they have shown to us – or what we might expect them to show us – but through the love revealed to us in Jesus Christ, an unmerited gift given with nothing expected in return. He told us what it means to be a part of a community of grace; a member of the Body. He showed us how to live our lives faithfully, courageously, and selflessly; in congruence with having been created as God's image.

So, not judging someone means first realizing that our judgement can be skewed. Second, it asks us to pay attention to our judgments honestly as they arise, which helps them to lose their strength. Bringing what is unconscious to consciousness is extremely powerful. And third, it asks us to remember that God's image is in every single person. The world would be a different place if we could at least do that much. Just by realizing that we do not know the fullness of any human being – and definitely not based solely on first impressions – can release much of the way we judge others.

Let us pray: *Dear Jesus, reveal to us the ways that we have judged others prematurely and unfairly. And give us the grace to see more clearly and love more dearly, creating more space for your mercy. Amen.*