

Pastor Bill Sass - Sermon for Sunday, September 13, 2020

THE TERRIBLE BURDEN OF JUDGING OTHERS

Romans 14:1-12

Years ago, there was a cartoon that went something like this: A man is speaking into the telephone, and you hear only his side of the conversation.

“Yes, mother, I’ve had a hard day. Gladys has been most difficult. Well, you know how she is. Yes, I remember you warned me. I remember you told me she would make my life miserable, and you begged me not to marry her. You were perfectly right. You want to talk to her? All right.” He looks up from the telephone, and calls his wife in the next room, “Gladys, your mother wants to talk to you.” None of us like to have someone else criticize us. But it especially hurts when it is someone in our own family.

St. Paul saw it happening in his family—the church. Christianity was taking in new adherents in a rapid fashion. Some of these new believers came from the ranks of orthodox Jews. But many of them—particularly those who came in through Paul’s influence—had been pagan Gentiles. Just like in a marriage, each new convert brought into the Christian family their own traditions, their own values, their own preferences.

Sometimes the Apostle Paul had to play referee. Some of the new believers were still attached to the Jewish Sabbath. Others sincerely believed that all days are holy, and one day is not lifted above others. Some of them fasted. Others saw no need for fasting. Some were meat eaters, and some were vegetarians. The disagreements within the early church were manifold. But worse than that—these disagreements became personal. People were passing judgement on others who did not follow the same customs they did.

The church was becoming divided. So, Paul felt obligated to say something about it. He wanted them to “cool it.” The church was big enough for all kinds of opinions. The important thing is that whatever their beliefs, their lives were to give glory to God. Out of his conflict within the church, comes our lesson from Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Passing judgement on others is still a problem in the church, isn’t it? Walter A. Clot, a pastor in Bluefield, VA, tells about a man who confronted him after church one day. “Preacher,” the man said, “I have two complaints about you.”

“What are they?” the pastor asked.

“First,” said the man, “when I was chairman of the properties committee, you tried to tell me how to do the job. You should just let the church leaders do their job the way they want.”

“What is the second complaint?” asked Pastor Clot.

Well,” said the man, “I don’t like the hymns the song leader picks out. I wish you would tell him to pick more of the old ones.”

Obviously, the man was not aware of the mixed message. He wanted the pastor to refrain from telling lay people how to do their jobs, but he wanted the pastor to tell the song leader which songs to sing. People are amazing.

Perhaps we ought to install an answering machine in the church like one I heard about in a major department store. It answered like this: “If you are calling to place an order, press 3. If you are calling to register a complaint, press 576-296-047-320-573-030-658. Have a good day.”

I’m exaggerating, of course. Ninety-nine per cent of church people are kind, gracious, supportive. But those of us who have leadership responsibilities in the church—whether as teachers, or musicians, or whatever may be our calling—are human beings, and words sometimes sting.

A cartoon strip portrayed a parishioner approaching the pastor after the service and saying, “Reverend, I want you to know that wasn’t one of your better sermons.”

Openly, the pastor responds with, “And Bill, I want you to know I’m grateful for constructive criticism.” In the next frame, the pastor walks into the study, locks the door, and then falls to his knees with a cry, “Arrgggghhh!”

I want you to know I am not that sensitive. What I want to get across is the damage that is sometimes done even in the church because of insensitive comments. The comments almost always start off like this: “I hope you don’t mind if I’m honest,” or, “This is for your own good,” or “Please don’t get mad at me, but....” And my favorite, “You know I wouldn’t say this, if I didn’t love you.”

Obviously, this is not a problem isolated to the church. There are families in which members do incalculable damage to one another because of caustic remarks.

There is a saying in the Navy: “the captain bites his tongue until it bleeds.” This expression refers to the way a ship’s captain feels, as he silently stands by, while allowing a junior officer to bring the ship alongside the dock for the first time. Many of us need to pray for the ability to bite our tongue—unless we can offer encouragement and support—whether it’s to our children, or spouse, other people in church, at work, or wherever we may be. Let me suggest a couple questions we might ask before we pass judgement on someone else’s efforts.

FIRST OF ALL, ARE YOU SURE YOU KNOW ALL THE FACTS? This is a good question to ask when you are ever tempted to criticize anyone else.

Jerry Simmons, a pastor in Houston, TX, tells of attending an afternoon college football game with his family. Afterward they stopped at a McDonalds nearby to get a bite before the long trip home. When backing out of the parking space, another car hit them from the front. There was very little damage, and after exchanging information with the other driver, they started the

four-hour trip home. After an hour or so, it got dark, so Simmons turned on the car lights. But there were no lights except on high beam. This was the day of the two-lane highway, and this one was winding and narrow. But they had to get home. So, Pastor Simmons drove home with his bright lights on.

The reaction of other drivers as they approached him from the opposite direction was interesting. Some would simply honk their horns. Others would switch on their bright lights and leave them on. Some even swerved into his lane, and made vulgar signs at him. He had no way of communicating that he couldn't help his condition. His lights were stuck on bright. He wanted to scream out the window, "I can't help it!"

God spoke to his spirit, says Pastor Simmons, and said there are many in the church, just like his car, with their lights stuck on bright. They are loud and glaring, and obnoxious, and say hurtful things and bother people, but at that point in time, they really can't help it. Others in the church, says Simmons, need to understand and minister to them, rather than trying to run them off the road, or out of the church, or trying to out-bright them. Some people simply have their lights stuck on high beam for a while, and can't help it. It would make all the difference in the world if we knew all the acts, wouldn't it?

Father Michael Mulvaney, a speaker and counselor on self-esteem, traveled a great distance at his own expense to do a talk for a high school group. That day the group seemed antsy and inattentive. One small clique in the back had a girl who was so rude that she had her back turned to Father Mulvaney as she blithely went on with her own conversation! Finally, this kind and good, but very tired and frustrated man singled out the girl with her back to him, and in an exasperated tone he said, "Look, I've traveled a long way just to be with you today. I deserve to be treated with some respect. You can at least give me the courtesy to turn around, and look at me! You have no right to be so rude."

The girl was very embarrassed and distressed to be singled out. With tears of humiliation and shame in her eyes, she said, "Father, I'm so sorry! But these are our deaf students, and I was translating your talk for them." As you can imagine, Father Mulvaney wanted to drop through a hole in the ground, and never reappear.

If we knew all the facts, it would make a difference.

After running a picture of new United States senators taking the oath of office, one local newspaper received a critical and sarcastic letter. The writer complained, "The senator from Hawaii doesn't know his right hand from his left." Senator Inouye of Hawaii took the oath with his left hand raised, and not the right one. But there was something the picture in the newspaper did not show, and the critical writer did not know.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Dan Inouye joined the army. He fought in Italy, and won the Distinguished Service Cross, the Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart with clusters. When he took the oath of office as a senator, he did it with his left hand raised,

instead of his right, because he lost his right arm in the service of his country. We could save ourselves a lot of embarrassment if we knew all the facts, before we criticized someone else. That is the first question. Do you know all the facts?

Here is the second: HAVE YOU EARNED THE RIGHT TO PASS JUDGEMENT? That is, when you are tempted to belittle someone else's efforts in the church, first ask, am I doing everything I should be doing to serve Christ myself? If you can answer in the affirmative, maybe—just maybe, you are on more solid ground.

Comedian Danny Kay frequently entertained at the Palladium in London where he drew standing-room-only crowds. On free afternoons, he loved to roam around the city, or take in matinees. On one such afternoon, he took in a play that was being received with the reserve we've come to associate with the British.

As the play was letting out, Danny overheard the play being discussed by three British army officers standing stiffly to one side: "Ghastly," said one, "Beastly," agreed the second. The third was tight-lipped. He didn't say a word.

One of the vocal ones turned to him. "And what was your opinion, Colonel?" he asked. The colonel explained that he had come on a free pass, "Hardly cricket to speak out under the circumstances," he added. "But if you gentlemen will excuse me..." and with that, he strode to the box office a few feet away, and bought a ticket. He was back in a moment with a ticket. "A stinker, gentlemen," he said tersely, "a stinker."

I like that third man's approach. Until he bought a ticket, he felt he was in no position to criticize. When you are tempted to complain about what kind of parent someone else is, first ask whether you are entirely the kind of parent you ought to be. Before criticizing someone else's character, ask if you have arrived at perfection yourself. If we put our criticism to that test, most of us will be mute. For we, too, are sinners saved by grace.

Do you know all the facts? Have you earned the right to judge others? Only One has earned the right to judge others. He did it on a cross 2,000 years ago. And the amazing thing is that He was the most tolerant, loving, accepting man who ever lived.

AMEN!