

Trinity IV (2 July 2023)

“BE ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven:”

+In the Name...

Did you ever get nervous when your teacher or one of your parents came into the room and you could tell they were just fit to be tied? I can remember racking my brain for those few seconds in between knowing the authority figure in question was unhappy and finding out the cause of that unhappiness, trying to remember what things I had left undone that I ought to have done, and what things I had done that I ought not to have done. Perhaps I suffered from a guilty conscience, but surely as a young boy there was no health in me! But as unbearable as those few moments of angst were, they were nothing compared with the relief I then experienced when it turned

out that my teacher or parent was upset with a different person altogether: my brother, a classmate, it did not matter as long as it was not me!

So if you were starting to feel a little uncomfortable as I read this morning's Gospel, I have good news for you: it was not written for you. Yes, you heard correctly: all that "don't judge", "don't condemn", "forgive one another", and worry about the beam in your own eye before you worry about the speck in your brother's eye; even if you do not subscribe to the contemporary world's notion that such outdated thinking is best relegated to a past generation stuck in at least a different decade, if not a different millennium, you are in luck because the author did not have you in mind.

Well, not exactly... you knew there had to be a catch, didn't you? It is not that the author did not have you in mind so much as the editors of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer did not have you in mind.

This portion of the Gospel according to St. Luke was originally placed during the Ember Days. Hopefully the Ember Days sound somewhat familiar to you, as they come four times each year: they are an opportunity to pray for an increase in vocations to the priesthood and also the religious life. Specifically this Gospel lesson was found on the Saturday of the summer Ember Days. When the Ember Days were shifted to fall during the week after Pentecost, regardless of what season that is on the secular calendar, the lessons moved to the Fourth Sunday of Trinity. So these lessons were chosen with future clergymen in mind. (Are you breathing a sigh of relief yet?) It would seem that some clergymen have been tempted to judge their flocks harshly or practice petty fault-finding, not just in Christianity but all the way back to the Jewish synagogue! Can you believe such a thing? Imagine! I have never preached to an audience made up primarily of clergymen and it has been some 12 years since I preached to a

seminary crowd, so what would I say if I were given such an opportunity today?

Well, there are several key points here, and none of them particularly fun to explore:

Let's start with judging. The secular press is quick to point out whenever they think the Christian community is judging. "I thought Christians were not supposed to judge?" they will throw at us.

Perhaps this is semantics, but what we as Christians are not allowed to do is judge the worthiness of another human being. I have to judge ("discern" might be a better word here) between right and wrong.

Depending on one's job or daily activities we might have to make decisions between right and wrong several times each day. When a person comes to the gate to ask to see the inside of the church, I should not judge his intentions based on how he is dressed or what I perceive to be his level of education. If on the other hand he walks

around the church and starts taking the icons off the wall or the candlesticks off the altar, I can discern that this is someone who should not be left alone in the church!

Following closely on the heels of judgment is condemnation. The best example of condemnation in Scripture is perhaps the woman caught in adultery. Scripture tells us she was caught “in the very act”, so there is no need for a trial and judgment. She, the people who bring her to Jesus, and Jesus Himself all know that she is guilty. Yet Jesus still forbids the crowd from taking the seemingly-obvious path of stoning this woman for her sins. “Let whoever of you is without sin cast the first stone,” Jesus tells the crowd. Yet not a one does so, but each methodically takes his leave. Jesus, the one person in the entire crowd Who is qualified to condemn her, chooses not to but forgives her instead. (Now, He does tell her to sin no more, but that is the subject of a different sermon.) As a priest, I have no business thinking

I am worthy to decide the final destination of anyone in the hereafter, even if I know information about a parishioner's life that most others do not. That determination lies solely with the Almighty.

Forgiveness is part and parcel of the Christians faith: every Sunday we pray, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." But do we really fathom how novel an idea this was in Jesus' time? The Jews understood forgiveness to be something you bought or earned. Such-and-such sin could be erased by sacrificing two turtledoves at the Temple. Another sin could be erased by stoning. The crowd was well within their legal rights when they brought the woman to Jesus, but He dropped the legal system on its head. The Church loves rules, and the clergymen are frequently the enforcers of the rules, but we also need to foster forgiveness.

The challenge for the clergyman is not just to see the shortcomings of his flock, but those of himself as well. Did you notice

the picture on the front cover of your bulletin? It is perhaps ridiculous in the way the beam is portrayed literally, but it illustrates how blind one can be to one's own deficiencies. Some of you may know that our vestry meetings at this Parish can get a little spirited. Some might even describe them as raucous. I have taken to using a gavel on occasion when necessary. One of my pet peeves is being interrupted, but I do not want other people being interrupted either. At least I think that is what I want. I am sure you can see where this is going: During one particularly festive discussion a member pointed out to me that I was interrupting him and not letting him finish what he was saying. Of course, he was correct, much to my chagrin. "Here vestryman," says Father, "I would help you pull the mote out of your eye but I am entirely blinded by the beam in my own eye..."

Sadly, I am the only hypocritical clergyman in this church today.

But perhaps there is something in this sermon applicable to the laity
as well...

+In the Name