**How Do We Keep From Judging Others?**

**FBC Albemarle**

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One of the top reasons people do not attend church is the sense of judgment found in congregations. As the body of Christ, we can either blow it off as an excuse people give or we can actually pay attention to what people outside of the church are feeling. Will I be accepted? Will I fit in if I don’t dress in a certain way? What if I don’t look like the people inside the church? Will they judge me for my lifestyle? What if someone finds out what I did last week? All of these are questions people outside of the church are asking. Honestly, if we are truthful with ourselves, these are the same questions we ask ourselves within the church. We just tend to hide it better than those outside of the church.

Judgment usually isn’t seen in a face-to-face confrontation. Somehow, I think it would be easier to deal with if it was that way. However, it shows up in the margins. It is the cutting of the eyes. It is the whispers in the hallways. It is the shunning of a person who doesn’t fit the mold. It is the sharing of someone’s struggles cloaked in a prayer concern. The worst kind of judgment is the one that is covered in holier-than-thou attitude.

We are pretty familiar with Christ’s teachings on not judging others. Jesus was pretty clear when he said, “Do not judge others.” He gives this ridiculous analogy that is to remind us how far we miss the mark when we look at someone else’s actions in contempt while never looking in the mirror to judge ourselves. Then Jesus again shares an analogy of the dogs and pigs. It doesn’t make sense to give dogs what is sacred and pearls to pigs. Dogs will chew up things we treasure, and pigs can’t digest pearls. In the same way, people can’t digest being judged or condemned. It doesn’t meet their need.

I like the way Eugene Peterson put it in The Message translation:

“Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults— unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. It’s easy to see a smudge on your neighbor’s face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, ‘Let me wash your face for you,’ when your own face is distorted by contempt? It’s this whole traveling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor.

“Don’t be flip with the sacred. Banter and silliness give no honor to God. Don’t reduce holy mysteries to slogans. In trying to be relevant, you’re only being cute and inviting sacrilege.”

Certainly, there is a difference between judging and assessing. Assessing other’s behaviors is part of life. Good parents pay attention to their children’s behavior and are responsible for correcting it when necessary. Teachers have to assess a student’s performance on a paper or a test. Assessing someone’s actions or behaviors is not the same as judging.

So, how do we draw the line between judging and assessing? Judging is making a negative evaluation of others without the willingness to help them become better people. When we judge others, we make negative assessments without any intentions of helping them to be better. We criticize; we condemn; we make judgments without wanting to understand the full story. When we make an assessment without a heart of compassion, we judge others in a way that Jesus warned against.

There are many reasons why judgment falls short of what God desires from us. First, judgment doesn’t flow from a heart of love. We all know when we are being judged and how that makes us feel. It makes us feel less than human and that is not the way of the kingdom. Second, judgment is deconstruction without reconstruction. When we judge others, we are tearing them down without the intent of helping them rebuild. Often, judgment comes from a person who sits on a perch and desires to keep others from knocking them off the perch. Finally, our judgment can (and often is) wrong. When we display judgmental attitudes, we are only saying, “I am right, and you are wrong.” Instead, we should live with a humble attitude that would take into account that we might actually be mistaken. The old saying contains great truth: “Do not judge another until you have walked a mile in their shoes.”

So, how do we keep from judging others? How do we actually battle against our biases and our prejudices? We learn empathy. Empathy is NOT feeling sorry for someone. Empathy is “feeling with” someone. It is the work we must do to understand people. It is going the extra mile to understand the way they do things and why, their physical and emotional needs, how they think about the world and what is meaningful to them. It is never judging the book by its cover. Empathy requires more. Empathy requires a willingness to do life with one another.

When we are willing to live life together and walk with a person through the highs and lows of life, we develop a deeper relationship with that person. When we understand that person in a more meaningful way, there is no room for judgment, only empathy.

Seventeen-year-old Ariana had given up hope that her family could provide her with the stability she needed in her life at that time. The ongoing conflict between her mom and dad consumed so much energy, there was nothing left to give to their daughter. She sought solace in texting her friends and dating boys who did not bring the best out in her.

Soon, her emotional abandonment turned into a physical abandonment. Due to her immigration status, Ariana’s mom was deported back to Costa Rica. Now having to live with her dad full-time during a time when she needed her mom the most, Ariana felt lost and lonely.

Through her church, Ariana discovered what empathy looked like and felt like. Denise was a single mom who could relate with Ariana’s pain and isolation because she had experienced the pain of divorce while growing up. When Denise heard that Ariana had a weekend cheerleading competition, she went and sat in the stands. Ariana was so moved by Denise’ gesture, she began sharing bits of her life she had not told anyone else.

For most of high school seniors, prom is something to look forward to unless you are a girl without her mom to go shopping with for just the right dress. By this time, Denise and Ariana was close enough for Ariana to ask Denise to go shopping with her for her prom dress. Knowing how important this night was to Ariana, Denise took time off work, found a babysitter for her own daughter and the two of them shopped in the local thrift stores until they found the perfect dress.

On the night of the prom, Denise went over to Ariana’s apartment to help with her hair and makeup. Through the technology of video conferencing, Ariana was able to share the especial evening with her mom in Costa Rica and her new “mom” in the U.S. It was a night to remember for all three of them. This is what doing life with one another looks like.

This kind of life is filled with grace and love. Grace is the free and unmerited favor of God. Love is desiring the best for the other person. Grace and love have been given to us freely by our Lord and Savior. We cannot earn them. Therefore, we ought to offer them to others as freely as it was given to us. Rather than judgment and condemnation, we should offer grace and love. It is the way of God’s kingdom.

Therefore, let us commit to walking with one another through life’s triumphs and struggles. Let us put away our judgment and contempt in favor of grace and love. Let us live as Jesus lived. Let us take seriously his transformational teachings for our lives.