

Rev. Jan Gregory-Charpentier
Kingston Congregational Church
July 11, 2021

Matthew 7:1-5

Seeing Clearly

Of all the questions Jesus asks, this one stands out as perhaps being one of the most vivid, the most visually comic. "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?" You can see them now, can't you, men and women, walking around with tree trunks growing out of their eyeballs but in no way deterred from their righteous effort to point out the speck of saw dust in someone else's. "Let me tell you what's wrong with you... with your ideas, your lifestyle, your theology, your priorities, your _____ (you fill in the blank)," all the while their own flaws are glaringly apparent seemingly to everyone else but them. We know the type, don't we? We've worked with them. We've lived next door to them. We were born into the same family as them. Maybe we've even met them at church (not our church, of course!). Jesus uses a word in this passage that he frequently applies to the Pharisees: the word is "hypocrite." Later on in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus will confront the Pharisees with their hypocrisy, again using some wonderfully visual language. He says: you Pharisees are like whitewashed tombs, pretty on the outside but decaying on the inside; you, Pharisees, are as ridiculous as someone who washes only the outside of their cup or bowl, but doesn't bother to clean out the inside, and now the dregs in there are rancid. And then here's my

favorite; you Pharisees put all your time and effort into straining out the teeny tiny gnat from your soup, but then go ahead and swallow a camel. Jesus had little tolerance, if any, for hypocrisy, especially when it came to the all-important subject of God and God's priorities. If you've read or heard any of the passages where he is standing up to those self-appointed religious experts, you might even wince at his verbal barrage: you fools, you blind guides, you brood of vipers! Jesus really lets those hypocrites, the Pharisees, have it!

But wait a minute, in Matthew 7 where we find our question for today, Jesus isn't talking to the Pharisees, is he? This passage comes from the Sermon on the Mount, where he has called his closest friends, his disciples to his side. This is their small group time. He's talking to his followers, his companions, his best friends. He is talking to us. "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?" You mean this isn't about my overly-critical boss, mother-in-law, co-worker or fellow church member? You mean this is about the log in my eye? This passage is about me? I'm the hypocrite?

Jesus, in his loving but unrelenting way, seems to see right into the heart of humanity. It isn't just that there are overly-critical, judgmental people *out there* who make our lives difficult at times, the so-called Pharisee all around us. The truth is we are them. We all have a penchant for seeing the faults of others and overlooking our own. So, let's rephrase the question: *Why do we see speck in our neighbor's eye but do not see the log in our own?*

The first thing this question should cause us to do is to be terribly honest with ourselves. What are the logs in our eyes? What are the camels in our soup that we're willing to swallow while making a fuss about the gnat? What is the grime and the muck on the inside of our seemingly gleaming cups? If we plan on confronting the errors and sins of others, humility goes an awfully long way. Some people accuse Christians of being self-righteous, of thinking of themselves as better than anyone else. If we've ever given that impression we need to apologize right now. If there's one thing the Christian tradition is clear on it is that all of us are "sinners saved by grace;" that each and every one of us carries within us the capacity and the history of our human fallibility. And if I try to rank or measure my relative worth or wretchedness in comparison to his, or hers, or theirs, making distinctions between who is more or less deserving of praise or punishment, I've pretty much missed the point altogether.

There's a wonderful story that comes out of the tradition of the desert fathers and mothers. In the 4th and 5th centuries CE, after Christianity became the religion of the empire and therefore began to be institutionalized, and some would say corrupted, a movement began in the deserts of Egypt where men and women (they were called the desert fathers and mothers) removed themselves from the sphere of imperial religion and created their own communities where they could live their faith more simply. They were the forerunners to the monastic movement. The desert fathers and mothers are

known for their stories, their down to earth wisdom, their simple but profound take on faith. This story comes from that era:

A monk was brought up before the brotherhood for having committed a grievous sin, and it was decided that he would be excommunicated. As the monk left the sanctuary, his head bent in shame, the esteemed Abba Bessarian stood up, fell into step behind his fellow monk and in a clear voice announced, "I, too, am a sinner."¹

If we are honest with ourselves we come to see we have more in common with the faults, sins and weaknesses of our brothers and sisters than we have difference. And while we might never fully remove those things that impede our vision, the "logs" in our own eye, we may with some honest self-searching, confession and prayer, whittle them down in size. May we be so lucky to be like our neighbor who only has a speck to contend with.

Besides being terribly honest with ourselves, the second thing Jesus' question should cause us to do is to feel and practice compassion for those who, like us, are imperfect, flawed, and full of inconsistencies. It's not that we are never to distinguish between behavior that builds up and behavior that breaks down. Jesus is not commending a laissez faire attitude. In the very next passage after this one he instructs his disciples not to throw their pearls before swine or give what is holy to dogs. It takes some judgment to know when we are wasting our gifts and resources in unpromising relationships and endeavors, or when, on the other hand, and to quote another of Jesus' teachings, we are to keep sowing our seeds on all manner of soil and leave the harvest up to God.

¹ The Spirituality of Imperfection, by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, (New York: Bantam Books, 1992) p. 48

Jesus wants his followers to use discernment and insight and reasoning. But when he instructs us “not to judge,” he is saying do not sit in the judgment seat over your neighbor. And he is our example. Rather than condemnation for those who have fallen, Jesus, over and over again, showed compassion... to the woman caught in adultery (whom we'll meet again next week), to the tax collector, to the prostitute, to the thieves on either side of his cross. As those who seek to mold our lives to the shape of his words and his example, we too are called to practice generous, foolish, and sometimes even costly, compassion.

The third and final thing Jesus' question about specks and logs should cause us to do is get down on our knees and thank God for the amazing grace which holds this whole darn world together. We are all awash in the flood of God's grace. All of this is grace. Waking up and opening our eyes each morning is grace. Life itself is gift and grace. This is the Good News Jesus invites us to turn toward and believe: we are embraced, accepted and beloved by a power so whole and holy it is eternal, it is everything, and we are so small and yet so important, and both our smallness and our import are God's unstinting, blessed and merciful gift to us. And in light of such amazing grace, the truest and most faithful attitude to bring to all of life is gratitude. Those who are humbled and caught up in gratitude for God's love, forgiveness and generosity, rarely have time or interest for sitting in judgment of others. Jesus knew this. Jesus lived this. His question to us about specks and logs serves as one more invitation to grow in our spirit, to live in the freedom of grace, to be saved from the part of us that

needs to judge others to feel good about ourselves. So here's my answer to the question Jesus asks: "Why do I see the speck in my neighbor's eye and do not see the log in my own... because, Lord, I am still learning how to be a disciple, but with your help and by your mercy I will spend less and less time sitting in judgment and more and more time being terribly honest with myself, practicing your generous compassion, and living as grateful and thankful a life as I possibly can."

Amen.