

March 19, 2017

Sermon: The Speck and the Log

Pastor Clay Oglesbee

Text: Matthew 7:1-5, 12

Once upon a time there was a baker. He bought his butter from a farmer who lived nearby. After a while, he began to suspect that the farmer was giving him short weight on his order. So for a while he weighed his butter carefully, and sure enough, his suspicions were confirmed. What was supposed to be a two-pound slab of butter actually only weighed a pound-and-a-half.

The baker was really angry, so he called the police and had the farmer arrested and brought before the judge in the court. The judge asked the baker, "What weights do you use to weigh out your butter?" The farmer answered, "Well, that's hard to say. It depends on who the customer is."

"What do you mean?" the judge asked. "Well, for most of my customers, I use the standards scales," the farmer said. "But for folks like the baker I have a different system." The judge said, "Really? So how exactly do you weigh out the baker's butter?"

The farmer answered, "It's really very simple. When the baker began buying my butter, I started buying his bread. So I weigh out his butter by putting one of his two-pound loaves of bread on the other side of the scale."

What weights are we using? Do we apply the same ones to ourselves and to others? How do we measure the neighbor's speck or splinter in their vision, and how do we measure the heavy timber obscuring our own vision and understanding of events? Are your scales generous toward others, or do they tip in favor your own righteousness and virtue at unfair expense to the people around you?

Marva Dawn once commented that a part of nearly every pastor's week is to listen to the complaints the brothers and sisters in the flock hold against one another. Think of that for a moment. This attitude would be unfortunate, but understandable and tolerable, if it were not almost always the case that when one asks, "Have you gone first to this brother or sister and sought reconciliation and forgiveness of one another," the answer, 98% of the time, is, No. Folks say they are too nice to tell the other what they really think for fear of hurting their feelings, but what they often mean is, they would rather go to every safe corner of church or community to complain about the splinter in the neighbor's eye before a sympathetic audience than to admit to their own logs of sin, and to be vulnerable with the sister or brother for the sake of forgiveness.

There is no need for Satan to actually exist in the world so long as we have one each other... so long as we

continue to prefer squabbling and resentments to peace and forgiveness.

“So-and-so did this. Such-and-such did that. I could not believe that Sister Susie Q would say such a thing about me! I could not believe that Brother Bobbie Jones would do such a thing toward me! I have always been innocent, and I have never done anything to provoke such unfair actions on their part. Go tell the others in the flock to straighten themselves out!”

But Jesus doesn't ask how you been done wrong to by others, and who is to blame! He asks, “Why worry about a speck in your brother or sister's eye, and pay no attention to the log in your own?” Why worry about the splinter in your neighbor's eye, when you ignore the heavy beam in your own? Here he is using a deliberately exaggerated and grotesque image in order to make a radical point about the way the people of God are to live. He concentrates all his force on a single point: the image of a woman or man who always considers and exaggerates her or his own actions as right and the actions of others as wrong. Probably, he first addressed this story to the Pharisees of his own time, to encourage them to take a good look at themselves, so to speak, but it has a certain amount of continuing relevance. There are still Pharisees in our midst. Yes? Yes, in our hearts.

A contemporary rendering of this text from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* goes like this: *Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, and criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. The 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?"*

I find that people generally relish this little saying from Jesus—when it is told on their neighbor, and that they do not like or accept it at all when it is applied to themselves. But Jesus' saying was never meant to be used to judge or critique a neighbor; its only use is as a warning and caution and critique of ourselves! The first question we might ask ourselves in every strained relationship or disappointing social mess we're involved in, if we follow Jesus on this, might be: what have I done to contribute to this? And, how can I, humbly, change this, right now, for the sake of my neighbor?

John Wesley said, when we fail to be generous toward our neighbor, we are, "dancing over the mouth of hell". Martin Luther used to say, "Backbiters....learning a bit of gossip about someone else, spread it in every corner, relishing and delighting in it like pigs that roll in the mud and root around in it with their snouts. This is nothing else than usurping the judgment and office of

God....” In his “Small Catechism”, Luther wrote: “We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain his actions in the kindest way.” ...”

We so urgently want to complain about our neighbors and our enemies, about their infirmities or mistakes or weaknesses, that we completely miss seeing the “plank” of self-will, ego, vanity and proud corruption in ourselves which far outsizes the shortcomings of the brothers and sisters. It almost seems as if we believe that we could be saved and sanctified by our own self-defense, as if we think we are good enough that we do not need the cross of Jesus nor the love of God. But that is practical atheism; it is self-idolatry. The truth is, we are only saved by God’s patient, generous grace. The grace we have *received* is the very grace we are to *give* to others on God’s behalf.

Friends, if we could all have back the time we have spent complaining about, suspecting the motives of, and criticizing others when their vices are no worse than our own, when their motives are no worse than our own, when their mistakes are no more egregious, when their flaws go no deeper than ours...*If we could have all that time back today, how much younger we would all be!!! I am 64.75 years old today, and if I could have all that wasted, hurtful time back, I think I would be about 23 and fresh and innocent of harm. How remarkable that would be! How about you?*

William Barclay wrote a 20th century prayer on this text for us: *“O God, give us the humility that realizes its ignorance, admits its mistakes, recognizes its need, welcomes advice, accepts rebuke. Help us always to encourage rather than criticize, to sympathize rather than discourage, to build rather than destroy....This we ask for your name’s sake. Amen.”*