

I am about to drop some profound and life-changing theological wisdom on you. Are you ready? I want to make sure you are prepared to hear this because this truth is a critical element of our faith as followers of Jesus. Are you listening?

No one is perfect.

I know! This is a life-changing revelation! Ok, this might not be the most mind-blowing truth you've ever heard. And yet, it seems that we forget this truth from time to time. Apparently, this was a struggle in the first century as well because Jesus includes this deep theological truth in his instruction to his followers. Crowds have gathered to listen to what we now call "The Sermon on the Mount" as Jesus preaches to his disciples and to the crowds at the beginning of his ministry. We have been hearing snippets from this sermon for the last two weeks beginning with the Beatitudes in which Jesus flips the script of who is blessed. (Turns out, you don't have to be rich and powerful to be blessed by God!)

The entire sermon envisions what life would look like in a community shaped by God's call for justice and grace. The opening verses of our scripture for this morning describe Jesus' followers as those who are marked by self-awareness and humble, passionate correction of the other rather than condemnation. This final section of the sermon begins with a phrase that has become familiar to most people, church goers or not, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." Warren Carter, New Testament Professor at Brite Divinity School, says that this common translation, "do not judge" is neither accurate nor helpful. He writes, "As everyone knows, we make judgments everyday despite the disclaimers 'it's not for me to judge' or 'to each their own.' We would be in deep trouble and frequent danger if we did not make discernments about people, situations and actions."¹ Carter, and other scholars, suggest that the word should instead be translated as "condemn". Do not condemn others. This command to not condemn says that no one has the authority to declare who is a recipient of God's grace

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3863

and who is beyond redemption. This command forbids the arrogance that is required to deny mercy or dignity to another person.

Jesus then asks this question of those listening: “why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” This comes back to that mind-blowing truth I mentioned earlier. No one is perfect. We all have things that keep us from seeing clearly 100% of the time. Logs or planks that get in the way of true understanding might be products of ignorance, or the result of trauma. Our vision might be obscured by prejudice toward another group or simply not being exposed to different experiences. Jesus is calling on his followers, including us, to work on our self-awareness, to thoroughly and intentionally examine ourselves and to seek to improve ourselves first and foremost before attempting to discern what is wrong with other people.

I have been thinking a lot this week about the Governor Ralph Northam of Virginia. You might have heard or read in the news that a photo was discovered on Governor Northam’s page in his medical school yearbook that shows two people – one in blackface and another wearing a KKK hood and robe. Northam initially apologized for the picture and then later said he is not in the picture and doesn’t know why it was included on his page of the yearbook. But he did admit that he had “darkened his skin” for a costume contest. If we approach this situation with the lens of our scripture text, we say that it is absolutely part of our call as followers of Jesus to call out racism in all its forms and demand accountability. But we must also examine ourselves both as individuals and as a country.

We continue to see these acts of racism as individual sins. But the truth is we have never fully reconciled our racist history as a country. This nation was built on the oppression and objectification of people of color, primarily black people, and that history continues to inform our current reality. Our systems, our businesses, our cultural norms are for the most part centered on whiteness and a white experience. Take for example the way we hold meetings. – Strict adherence to an agenda, typically the leader or leaders have the authority. Example of circle meeting in Standing Rock. Invitation was

open to anyone to speak with the request that it be relevant to the topics at hand. Sat in a circle and the convener went around the circle, holding space for anyone to speak. We went around the circle multiple times until there came a time when there were no more comments. Was this the most efficient way of holding a meeting? Probably not, but efficiency was not the value held in the highest regard. The format of the meeting placed the values of relationship and equality ahead of efficiency. Strict adherence to agendas and timeframes is a construct of white culture. And because our country was founded on white norms of doing things, it is considered normal. White supremacy comes in when we declare that it is the best way of doing things and that other practices are inferior.

Example of forgiveness ritual of the Babema tribe in South Africa. Person who has done wrong is placed at the center of the village alone and unfettered. All work stops and everyone in the tribe gathers in a large circle around the individual. Then each person speaks to the accused one at a time recalling the good things of that person. All their positive attributes and good deeds. This ceremony often lasts several days and ends with joyous celebration as the person is welcomed back into the fullness of the community. This practice has a much different focus than our current justice system which primarily focuses on punishing and isolating people who have done wrong.

We have an enormous log in our eye as a nation and we continue to only focus on the individual specks of others. I don't want to imply that individual actions like those of Governor Northam are acceptable because we haven't fully killed the falsity of white supremacy. The writer of Matthew's Gospel does assume that there are occasions within communities when ethical discernment and community discipline are necessary. But, this must be done with an awareness of the community's own failures (individually and communally) and of the forgiveness of God. We can continue to hold people accountable for their acts of racism, but to do so without examining our own issues of white supremacy and privilege as individuals and as a country, is irresponsible and futile. The system that produces these behaviors is still functioning and nothing will

change if we are only picking specks of dust out of the eyes of others while the log of white supremacy is jammed in the eye of our country.

This metaphor of course is important in our day to day interactions as well. Many of us, myself included, find it easy to point out the faults of others while ignoring the same fault in ourselves. This happens in my house around tidying up. I am quick to notice the dirty dishes or trash that Ken might leave around the house but am quick to ignore my own mess. This is a really simple and basic example, but you get the idea. Jesus knows that this is human nature. He knows that sometimes we don't apply the same rules to ourselves that we apply to others and so he adds in this simple yet timeless proverb: Treat others the way you want to be treated.

You'll notice he doesn't say treat others the way they have treated you. This isn't a transactional or a conditional command. This command calls on us to discern what the loving thing is to do without basing that decision on the actions of others. The truth is, we may not get treated the way we want to. AND we should still treat them the way we would want to be treated – with compassion, grace, and love. This, Jesus says, is the summation of the law and the prophets. The greatest commandment according to Jesus is to love God and the second to love your neighbor as yourself. There seems to be a theme here. Next time we start to tell someone "You've got something in your eye," may we pause and hold up a mirror and make sure we have worked on any logs that might be making our own vision a little blurry. Let us be lumberjacks of God's love. Amen.