

A MOST TEMPTING SIN

James 4:11-12

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
20 September 2015

The minute we see a person we don't know, we begin to assess him, wonder about her, make judgments. We do this mostly unconsciously. The person sitting next to you on the plane, the person who walks onto the elevator with you right before the doors close, the new person at school: we immediately begin to evaluate data about him or her. Does it look like the person is rich, or poor? How well-dressed is she? Does he look like a conformist, a rule-follower, or a rebel? Does anything about the person make you feel afraid? Are you drawn to this person or do you want to keep your distance?

This impulse towards sizing up another person seems almost natural, automatic, something that can't be controlled. And sometimes those judgments are necessary. They may protect us in certain situations.

But what we're doing can also be dangerous. It's pre-judging. We're making judgments about people based on their outward appearance only. We don't know anything about their character, their talents, their intentions. Nor do we know anything about the pain or brokenness in their lives. We're practicing prejudice - which is what pre-judging is. We all do it, and we all have been the victims of it.

Have you ever felt that you lost an opportunity because someone assumed that you weren't capable? Because of your gender, your age, your ap-

pearance, the color of your skin, your name, or anything other than your actual skills and qualifications? Most of us have.

Our scripture for this morning reminds us of one of the standards of Christian behavior. Christian people do not judge others. It is one of the topics on which Jesus was crystal clear. “Do not judge,” he said. Very hard to misinterpret those three words. What Jesus DID was shine a light on certain characteristics he found to be unacceptable. And we are to do the same. We should maintain high standards for ourselves, and hold one another accountable for the way we talk and live. It is ok to evaluate the character of people. If you are deciding who to hire, or for whom you should vote, you should look closely at the way someone lives. Are they honest? Trustworthy? Hard-working? Empathetic? Generous? Open-minded? As we parent, we should be trying to instill those character traits in our children, and — better yet — modeling them.

What we want to avoid is being judgmental; labelling someone as if we were judge and jury over that person’s life. Judgmentalism makes us harsh; it makes us self-righteous and superior. It is bad religion, and it is one of the stereotypes of Christians that leads people far far away from the church, sometimes for good.

Some of Jesus’ most critical words were directed towards the Pharisees. Members of the Pharisees were concerned about strictly following Jewish law, to the letter. They took pride in pointing out when other people were missing the mark. In one passage, Luke describes them acting as the poster children for self-righteousness. A Pharisee stands in the temple loudly praying, thanking God

that he is not like the tax collector who is quietly praying in another part of the temple. Most of us are not that blatant, but judging is a constant temptation. Here are some of the specific problems with this behavior.

First, judging is selective. We each have our pet peeves, or pet sins. We pick on those people whose behavior prickles us. Think how often we hear phrases like these. The problem with the world today is: fill in the blank. Muslims. Greedy rich people. Welfare moms. Gang members. Washington insiders. The NRA. Liberals. Smokers. And on and on. We condemn some behavior but ignore others. The truth is that the world can't be easily divided into good and evil. The line between good and evil runs smack down the middle of each one of us.

The second problem with judging is that it is destructive. Labeling and name-calling only serves to polarize communities. Surely we see this in our nation, and in our world today. And when judging is personal, it can destroy people's lives. The child who is bullied may turn to drugs or other self-destructive behavior, or suicide. Judging allows no room for conversation or conversion. It is destructive.

Judging is also hypocritical. We're always ignoring our own foibles when we're busy looking for the faults of others. After President Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky was made public, other politicians ran to the nearest microphone to condemn him with great passion and enthusiasm. No fewer than four of them were forced to later admit inappropriate relationships of their own.

The overarching problem with judging, from a Christian point of view, is that it violates the example and teaching of Jesus. Jesus tells us not to judge. It's not our place, it's not our business, it's not helpful, and it drives people away from the forgiving grace-filled message of Jesus.

I hope you will take your bulletin home and read the commentary that Lou Suarez wrote about today's scripture. He tells us that James warns us of the dangers that can be caused by our words, not just words of judgment but words of gossip or slander - any words spoken from envy, jealousy or anger. Think of that. How many times do we speak out of envy, jealousy or anger? How easy is it for us to let an unkind word about someone else slip out? How often do we even, if we're being brutally honest, relish the opportunity to say something negative about someone else? It may seem harmless. We laugh about it. We talk about getting together with friends to "dish some dirt." But is it truly harmless? Or are we contributing to a society in which meanness is tolerated, even celebrated?

A couple of weeks ago, I happened to turn on the radio just in time to hear a speech given at the Cleveland City Club by Arun Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. Arun is 80 years old, though you'd never guess it to look at him ... again, prejudgments aren't usually very helpful...he has spent his life trying to spread his grandfather's teachings and philosophies. In another sermon, I'll be sharing one of the remarkable stories he told about his childhood. He had many fascinating stories and messages, and then at the end, he responded to questions. Person after person asked him about current conflicts in this country and

elsewhere. What is his advice for the United States about how to deal with the current state of distrust between police and many citizens? What is his advice for dealing with our rampant gun violence? What his advice for dealing with terrorists? Good questions, every one of them. And he addressed each of them, thoughtfully. But the basic answer was the same every time. It begins with us. We can be part of the solution, but not just by telling politicians what to do. We ourselves are contributing to the problem, whenever we decide that violence is the first response to all human conflict. We ourselves are contributing to the problem, whenever we tolerate violence in our homes, violence in our schools, violence within our own hearts. If we want a more peaceful, nonviolent world, it begins with us.

After I heard most of his talk on the radio, I ran downstairs and set the recording on the TV so that I could watch it again. And I've thought about his words many times. There's a part of me that wants to say, "No. We are not a part of the problem. You need to be talking to world leaders, or to those who actually perpetrate violence." But the more I've thought about it, the more I realize how wise his words are. Like the old folk hymn, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me", peace and non-violence begin with us.

If we want there to be a world where there are no more school shootings, then we need to do everything we can to make sure that our children learn to treat one another with dignity and respect. We need to be sure that they are not bullied, and that if they display signs of mental illness they are given appropriate

mental health care. We need to show them, and teach them, how to resolve conflicts in non-violent ways.

Our culture glorifies the use of language that is demeaning and degrading — whether we consider athletes who talk trash about one another, or reality TV shows full of back-biting and vicious lies, or politicians who seem willing to say or do anything to grab attention. It is up to us to set different examples, to realize that our words have power. They can be used for good, to lift people up, encourage them and praise them — or to demean and belittle.

I have told this story before, so my apologies in advance to those of you who have heard it. But every time I preach about the dangers of our words, I think about my parishioner in Henry, Illinois named Verne Akright. I was the pastor of the First Christian Church, a Disciples of Christ congregation. In that tradition, baptism is done by immersion. Students are baptized at about the Confirmation age, about 12. I was preparing for my first class to be baptized the following Sunday. Verne dropped by the church that week, as he often did, just to chat. “Getting ready for those baptisms?” “Yes.” “You know, when you baptize them, you hold that handkerchief over their mouths and you dunk them all the way back into the water, right?” “Yes.” “Well, make sure you get their mouths all the way under.” “Why’s that, Verne?” “Because, of all the parts of the body that can get you in trouble, the mouth is number one.”

It’s so deliciously tempting to tell a great story that has everyone laughing, at someone else’s expense. It can feel so good to hear a piece of gossip about someone you’ve secretly envied. You wouldn’t admit it, but you’re happy when

someone you don't really like gets into some hot water. It'd be fun to tell someone else about it.

But we never really know what someone else's life is like; we just can't tell from the outside. Do we really want to say things that bring more hurt and pain into the world?

Let us pray. Holy God, let there be peace on earth; may every person be treated with dignity and respect, and let it begin with me, with us. We pray in the name of the Prince of Peace. Amen.

*With thanks to: [The Answer to Bad Religion is Not No Religion](#), Martin Thielen