



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday After Trinity, June 19th, 2016

“Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven”

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠

When I first sat down to write this Sunday's sermon, it was admittedly with a sigh of resignation. “This passage?” I thought. “Not this passage. This is one of the most preached upon passages in the Gospels. Surely there have been hundreds of thousands of sermons preached on this very passage already over the past two thousand years, and it's fairly self-explanatory.” Then I listened to the news on the radio, and checked out the news on the internet and the goings-on on Facebook, and it became immediately apparent that very few people had actually been *listening* to those sermons, so I figured it couldn't hurt to add my two cents to the sea of pocket change floating around the world on this passage.

The fact is, as much as people like to cite this passage, they often do so erroneously. Well-intentioned folks will tell you this passage roughly translates to “mind your own business,” which is certainly not the case. Other folks, hopefully just as well intentioned, will tell you that it means you're free to judge another so long as you're alright with God first; which is also certainly not the case.

Proverbs 27:17 tells us *“Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend,”* so we as joint members of the body of Christ are obviously called to keep each other sharp, and

steadfast in the faith and in the duties and practice thereof. In Paul's second epistle to Timothy, he writes *“Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction.”* Scripture obviously requires us at times to make solemn judgements and valuations, so why is Jesus so clearly condemning judgement in so many words?

The truth of the matter is, Jesus repeatedly disabuses us of things that we love, yet do us harm. Like a goldfish that will eat until it dies, or [ANOTHER GOOD ANALOGY FOR THAT], we people absolutely love to do certain things that we enjoy that are simply no good for us, and can eventually harm us physically or spiritually; the two biggest among them are worry. We love to fret and wring our hands and micro-manage God by worrying about things we can't control; yet Jesus takes that out of our hands in the Gospel of Matthew. And as much as we love to worry and fret, our love of judgement eclipses that by an order of magnitude. And boy howdy, we do love some good old fashioned judgement, don't we? There's nothing quite like the feeling of knowing you're better than somebody else, is there? Yet here comes killjoy Jesus, and politely takes that off our plates as well.

Just this past week, a minister in another part of the state whom I'm friends with said something online that I thought was particularly lacking in grace. And when I called him out on it, he told me he was just being matter of fact, and that I should perhaps go pound sand. And indeed, after a couple more polite but contentious exchanges, I did drop the topic; but in my head, I thought "what a pharisee! What a whitewashed tomb!" And I'll tell you, I was thankful I wasn't a hypocrite like this other minister.

And like *that*, in the parable of the publican and the Pharisee, I was the Pharisee. My attempt at being the iron which sharpens iron went, due to my own carelessness, from being an act of stewardship to an act of judgement, and ultimately, to pride. My friend said the arguably gauche thing, yet my own self-assuredness led to me being *inarguably* the bad guy. I was no longer attempting to steward a brother in Christ, I was now deciding that this man that feeds the homeless and takes communion to the sick and buries the dead, must be some sort of hypocrite; I wasn't helping him, I was judging him, and it was a sobering reminder of how true the old phrase is, "the path to hell is paved with good intentions."

Judgement, like vengeance is something God completely and totally reserves for Himself. That's not because God is greedy, like a child that snatches back his favorite toy when you pick it up; on the contrary, it's because God is quite merciful. He's merciful to *us*, the would-be judges, because judgement is a terrible burden to bear. You have to know beyond a shadow of a doubt the hearts and minds of the people you're judging; you have to know things unknowable. When humans judge, there's usually a lot of guesswork involved, and to find out later you judged somebody unfairly is an even greater burden to bear.

God is also merciful to those who would be judged, in that He gives them a great number of opportunities to repent. We have the guidelines and edicts for how to live outlined in Scripture, we have the sharpening we provide to each other, and the guidance of the The Holy Spirit - there are a number of ways we can grow in grace and understanding, when don't shut each other out by executing judgement instead of pursuing Christian

stewardship. Jesus spoke often of the final and rightful judgment of God, so we can be assured this is a very real thing indeed. When we make the disastrous decision to do this, we are in fact continuing the very unfortunate decision made by Adam and Eve and even the devil himself - we are presuming to be worthy of the knowledge of God; to be even like God Himself.

Many years ago, I went to a priest I knew for confession. I'd done something that vexed me, and I wanted to get it off my chest, and to seek guidance on making amends. He offered me some very wise counsel, and after the confession was over, I said "I hope this doesn't make you think less of me." He smiled and said "Michael, I know *me*. I don't have time to think less of *you*." When we are sober-minded enough to stop judging others, we find we suddenly have time to focus on our own sins and our own shortcomings. And when we do that, we actually become powerful tools for God here on Earth, because when we are that acutely aware of our own frailty, we are much better stewards and guides of our brothers and sisters.

Jesus reminds us that God sends rain on the just and the unjust, and that wheat grows with the tares. If we know this to be true, then we must also deduce that it is not our place to even imagine passing final judgement on somebody else. Rather with patience and charity, we as a people can build each other up, rather than tear each other down. Rather than playing the role of the hammer driving in nails, we can truly be the iron which sharpens iron from Proverbs.

In condemning judgment, Jesus gave us a parable about the blind leading the blind, and rightly said that when that's the case, both will fall into the ditch. So as a personal favor to me, I'm going to ask all of you to be especially mindful of that this week. The fact is, in the parable of the publican and the pharisee, I've already been the pharisee this week. So please, steward instead of judge, that you might stay out of any ditches; I'd hate to wake up and realize that in addition to being the Pharisee, I've also been the bad guy in my other favorite parable in Luke - that of the uncaring priest; although if I am, I'm sure my buddy across the state will come along and be the Samaritan. *Amen*