**To Judge or Not to Judge?**

**Text: Romans 14:10**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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So I’m at this backyard barbeque, about 35 years ago. I’m young, single, recently ordained…and I meet this young woman. And we get to talking. She’s single (check), smart (check), Christian (check), the daughter of a minister (check), active in the local community (check); plus, she’s very pretty (check, check, check, check). But as we talk, it becomes very clear that we’re not quite on the same page theologically. In fact, she’s about as far to the right on the theological spectrum as I am to the left, which is to say (in those days), *very* far. Turns out that her father is a minister, yes, *but* a fundamentalist Southern Baptist minister. And by the time I tell her that I don’t take the story of Adam and Eve literally, she thinks that I’m some kind of heretic!

But, here’s the thing: we kept talking. We fought the temptation to judge each other – well, mostly; instead, we *listened* to each other. The budding romance wilted before it had really blossomed (that’s because God knew that my soul mate was still about 500 miles and 25 years away!), but in the mean time we learned a great deal from each other. Each of us tempered our views by drawing upon the very different wisdom of the other.

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?” That’s the question that Paul puts to us in today’s text. Of course, he first put the question to a young church in the middle of the 1st century. The new church plant in Rome was not a congregation that Paul started. He’d never met these folks, but he’d heard a lot about them, and he was planning a trip to Rome so that he could spend time with them. His letter to the Roman Christians serves primarily to introduce himself and his theology to these folks, but being essentially a pastor and teacher he can’t resist offering some advice to this young congregation. Because, you see, like every church that ever existed, there is some bickering going on. One of the issues has to do with whether or not to eat meat. In all likelihood, the meat in question had been sacrificed to some god or another before being put on the market. With the multitude of gods in the Roman pantheon, it was hard to find meat that had *not* been slaughtered on some alter. We know from Paul’s discussion of this issue in 1 Corinthians 8 that he personally thinks this is not a big deal. The gods in question don’t really exist, so the fact that an animal was butchered on an alter that someone built to an imaginary god doesn’t taint that meat in any way. But Paul also recognizes that a young Christian who only recently worshipped one or more of those imaginary gods might feel guilty about eating such meat, and that guilt might get in the way of his or her spiritual formation. So for *that* person, Paul suggests, it’s better that they refrain from eating meat for the time being; *and,* it’s better for the whole congregation if those who don’t have such scruples refrain from judging these folks who have opted to be vegetarians, and for the vegetarians to refrain from judging the meat lovers.

But Paul doesn’t leave the issue there. He moves from this particular instance to the broader issue of judging one another: of passing judgment on those who view things differently than you do; of looking down your nose at someone who disagrees with you on religious and other important matters, as if you are obviously right and they are obviously wrong and therefore you are somehow morally and intellectually superior to them.

Paul perhaps has in mind someone like Lucy from the Peanuts comic strip. Lucy once said, “Those of you who think you know it all are bothering those of us who really do!”

Now this is tough because we all really do know a great deal. In any given situation you’re likely to know more about a given topic than someone else in the room, and another person is likely to have some expertise in a different area that you lack, while a third person knows something about yet another area. And when we know what we’re talking about, or we know what really needs to be done in a situation, and we get pushback from someone who really doesn’t know what they’re talking about, oh my goodness it is so hard not to judge!

I have a friend who has an opinion on everything; and of course he’s always right. Even when he doesn’t know what he’s talking about, he’s still right. And sometimes you just want to slap the guy and say, “Shut-up, you idiot, and listen for once!”

It’s hard not to judge when you really do know what you’re talking about. And then there are all those situations where we *don’t* know what we’re talking about, but we don’t know that we don’t know, so it’s still hard not to judge.

And there are whole lot of conversations going on like that these days: people speaking out of ignorance, not listening to each other, and saying outrageous things to each other in a spirit of judgment. I’m not on social media much, but I’m told that you see all sorts of insults and put downs on Facebook and Twitter and so on when people are talking about politics or religion or the other issues of the day. Not to mention the vitriol that comes out of the mouths of some preachers and politicians and radio talk show hosts. We’re all so quick to think that I’m right and you’re wrong and you’re some kind of inferior being because you’re wrong.

Wisdom begins with humility. That’s the first thing to remember if one is to refrain from judging: wisdom begins with humility. We don’t know nearly as much as we think we know. And what we do know isn’t infused with as much virtue as we think it is. “Our knowledge is imperfect,” Paul says (1 Corinthians 13:9). That’s because all of our knowledge is limited by our past experiences. We are creatures of nature. We don’t have the overall perspective that God has. Our knowledge is contingent upon where we’ve been, whom we’ve known, what teachers we’ve had, what books we’ve read, what we’ve done, what has been done to us. It’s kind of like this: we spend our whole lives walking through a narrow valley. And if we pay attention we can learn a great deal about the things in that valley: the trees that are there, the rocks that are there, the wild flowers that are there. And because we know a lot about that particular valley, we may think we know a lot about *every* valley. But in fact the valley over that next ridge is very different. And someone who spends his or her whole life in that other valley will know some things that are very different from what we know. We each live our lives in these different valleys. God is the only One who’s up on the mountaintop. God alone can see into *all* the valleys. God alone can know all of those rich details of which we know only in part. Which is why we need to be humble about what we do know; recognizing that there’s a whole lot that we don’t know. True wisdom begins with humility.

But there *are* some things that we *do* know. And so the second key to refraining from judgment is to have the courage to *say* what we know, to speak out from our particular point of view, while having the grace to admit that we might be wrong. Because we are creatures of nature, our knowledge is contingent on what we’ve experienced in this world. But because we are made in the image of God, we can partially rise above our limited experience and have very wise insights about the way things are and the way things ought to be. That’s when it’s most tempting to judge. We have these keen insights. It’s kind of like God lifts us part-way up the mountain and for a moment we can see more clearly than when we’re down in the valley. We have these keen insights, and forgetting that we’re creatures with only limited insight, we pretend that we’re God and that we’re absolutely right! We forget what we’re only part-way up the mountain and we imagine that we’re all the way at the top with God.

But even if we’re never absolutely right, sometimes we’re at least *partly* right and then we *must* speak out; we *must* act. This is Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the church door and launching the Reformation, or Abraham Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation, or Susan B. Anthony demanding the vote for women, or you or me in a church meeting or a family conversation or witnessing an act of racism. Sometimes we *must* intervene. The challenge is to speak and act with confidence without being judgmental. It helps if we remember that we might be wrong.

And whether you’re right or you’re wrong, remember that it’s not about you. That’s the third key to refraining from judgment: it’s not about you. That person whom you’re tempted to judge? God welcomed them, just as God welcomed you. God welcomed them into your church or your family or your workplace or your classroom; God welcomed them into the world. And if God welcomed you, who am I to say that you’re stupid or ignorant or immoral and that you should get out of here?

It’s not about you. You don’t live to serve yourself; nor do others live to serve you. “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:8). That’s how Paul sees it. It’s not about your individual beliefs or my individual beliefs, it’s about God’s Truth, and trying to discernGod’s Truth…together. By studying scripture and learning from each other’s experiences and looking around at the world and listening to each other, it’s about discerning God’s Truth together. Because you can tap into a little bit of that Truth and I can tap into a little bit of that Truth and together we can tap into even more of it. And even when we can’t agree, we can still listen and learn and work out compromises along the way.

Wisdom begins with humility, because sometimes you might be wrong, and anyway it’s not about you; it’s about God. God alone is the Judge. And each of us is accountable to God. That’s part of the reason why you can have the courage to speak out and disagree when you think you’re right: you’re not ultimately accountable to that person with whom you’re disagreeing, that person who might think less of you because you dare to disagree with him or her. Who cares what they think about you because you’re accountable to God. We dare to speak out because we’re accountable to God and we refrain from judging because we’re accountable to God. God alone is the Judge. God will ultimately conclude who’s right and who’s wrong. And I don’t know about you, but for me that such a relief: I don’t have to figure out for sure what’s right and what’s wrong, or who’s right and who’s wrong; that’s God’s job!

God will conclude who’s right and who’s wrong when we come before the Lord on Judgment Day. But we need not fear that day because the Judge is gentle and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. No matter how wrong one might be or how right one might be, the One before whom we all kneel in judgment can make us stand. Who am I to judge you when, in the final analysis, the only One who *can* judge you will raise you up and forgive you? That’s the same One who can and will and does forgive me, the same One who can and will and does forgive all…who kneel before the judgment seat.

Someone said, “The happiest people I know are always evaluating and improving themselves. The unhappiest people are usually evaluating and judging others.” Perhaps the happiest of all are those who heed the word of the Lord as found in Psalm 46: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Amen.