

“Specks and Logs, Meat and Veggies – Where Do We Go From Here?”

Matthew 7:1-5

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

Romans 14:1-12

In a world created by Dr. Seuss, two peoples are at war: the Yooks and the Zooks. Theirs is a conflict that goes back at least two generations, each side knowing that the other was wrong and evil. // The story is told by a grandfather Yook, telling his grandson about the war. He takes him past a sign that says, “Yooks are not Zooks!” and says, “Every Zook must be watched! He has kinks in his soul! That’s why, as a youth, I made watching my goal, watching Zooks for the Zook-Watching Border Patrol!” Then he tells his grandson his life story – how he has watched the Zooks. First, he had a tough-tufted prickely Snick-Berry Switch, but one day a Zook fought back with a slingshot. So the grandfather came back with a triple-sling jigger. The Zook ran away, but came back another day with a Jigger-Rock Snatchem, which captured the rocks and flung them right back. So the Yook came back with a Kick-a-Poo kid, a gun that shot, “powerful Poo-a-Doo Powder.” But the Zook only came back with an, “Eight-Nozzled, Elephant-Toted Boom-Blitz [that] shoots high-explosive sour cherry stone pits.” Then came an Utterly Sputter that sprinkled blue goo, but it was answered by a blue-gooser as well. By the end of the story, each side has invented a Big-Boy Boomeroo, a small device that will mean total victory. The story ends with the grandson aghast – who would use such a weapon? And what was this war all about – this generations-long blood feud? The Yooks eat their bread butter side up and the Zooks eat their bread butter side down. It is “The Butter Battle Book,” after all.

I imagine there are a few morals that people have taken from this story, but one of them certainly has to be that once we make a judgment about people, it’s really easy for things to escalate and spiral out of control. Once the judgement is made, we can lose all perspective – total

condemnation can feel like the most natural thing in the world: our kind has the, “right, honest way” and they are terrible, wrong, evil in all things. All from one, small judgment ages ago.

Jesus tells all who would hear him, “Do not judge others, so that you may not be judged.” Perhaps you’ve been on the receiving end of this one. You’re having a conversation with someone and you make one, maybe-sorta off comment about someone or something. Then, they’ll come back at you with a little harsh “Judge not!,” which they say in a, well, kind of judgey way. They are now smug, righteous, and correct – having shut you down and shown you up as the judgey person you truly are (they’re not judgmental, you’re judgmental!). The most fun thing about these conversations is that they happen with little or no irony.

But, leaving aside for a moment how we sometimes misuse or fall victim to this Bible verse, what is Jesus saying here? The Greek word used for “judge” in this passage can mean “to decide” or “to think,” but if you look at that in context, the sentence would make zero sense, “Do not think about others so that you may not be thought about”? No, Jesus isn’t telling us to stop thinking, to stop discerning what is going on around us. If we step back, we can see that the primary meaning of “to judge” is to bring someone to trial, to announce the final verdict of innocent or guilty. Jesus is saying that we are not the final judge of anyone’s innocence or guilt. We are not the one who determines their worth or their punishment. We do not see into their souls as G-d does. And so, Jesus warns, “You will be judged in the same way you judge others.” If we jump to conclusions, don’t take past circumstances into account, don’t look at the present situation, refuse to show grace and mercy and patience – Jesus says that’s how we’ll be judged by G-d. But if we pray for one another, seek to do good for one another, see the light of Christ in their eyes and in their hearts – if we judge fairly and kindly, we will be judged fairly and kindly.

When Jesus said, “Judge not,” we know that he wasn’t saying that we should have no opinion about sin and wrongdoing and evil in this world. We are to recognize and respond to all that is broken, but we are to do it with eyes towards love and mercy and justice. 1 Thessalonians emphasizes this, “Test everything; hold fast to what is good.” We are not called to blithely accept things as broken, to make excuses for the evil around us. We do good, but we resist evil. And if we are to do that, we must test everything to find the good – to look for the good and nurture it in ourselves and around us. True nonjudgmental Christian living is anything but passive tolerance.

Returning to the Gospel passage, we can see Jesus’ first answer to our impulse to be judgmental. Did you not notice that log in your own eye? Did you not notice all that ways you have come up short or really, truly meant well only to have everything blow up spectacularly? What’s beautiful about this speck and log story is not that we are doomed forever to be blinded by our own failings – far from it! Jesus is saying that if we see the log in our own eyes, really work to address our own sin and blinders, then we can see clearly. Then, we can be of real help to others in healing their own hindrances and starting to address their own obstacles. But we should always, always see our own logs as logs and their specks as specks. Therein we find humility and grace and empowerment to be of real service.

This theme gets picked up again in the passage from 1 Thessalonians. There, like other passages, Paul charges the congregation to care for the spiritual well-being of the congregation. He says, “we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.” “Admonish the idlers” is not a very good translation. What the NRSV has as “idler” really means a person who is out of step with G-d’s appointed order and will for humanity. The word draws from military language so it’s closer to someone who is out of formation or has maybe, temporarily, lost sight of the mission. It specifically refers to

someone who's already gotten their, "marching orders" from G-d, but maybe lost track of them a little along the way. They know their mission, but they need guidance. So, admonishing them isn't a yelling, screaming, judgmental, how could you be so stupid, how could you fail us all, you're going straight to hell kind of interaction. Admonishing is a gentle reminder of what the mission was so that the follower of Christ can say, "Yes, that's right! I didn't notice I had gotten off the path." Rather than the powerful righteous one who judges the sinner into submission, this interaction is of one who trusts and expects the follower of Christ to recognize their own sinful behavior that they had not realized was sinful. This interaction has faith that the sinner wants to be good.

And that, my friends, brings us to meat and veggies. Paul is writing to a different community this time – the church in Rome. Rome being such a cosmopolitan city, the church is filled with people from all over with all kinds of backgrounds and cultures and all kinds of reasons for doing what they think is right. Some of them are meat eaters and others (duh, duh, duh) are vegetarians. There were all kinds of reasons for being vegetarian in ancient Rome: some would have read or heard the book of Daniel, which says that Daniel would not eat the king's food because he had sacrificed the meat to idols. Not wanting to look as though they were supporting idol worship, they would choose to abstain from all marketplace meat (because, honestly, who knows where that stuff came from?). Others would have felt that wine and meat were gluttony – overindulgence and not appropriate for earnest spiritual seekers. Some people in Rome, now I just learned this this week, some even believed in the transmigration of souls – meaning that after you die your soul is reincarnated into an animal or another person. For some of those people, eating meat meant, essentially, killing another person and they couldn't do that.

Paul, for his part, did not agree with any of those people. For him, in Christ we have liberty and the things that we eat or don't eat – they are not the keys to our salvation. That's how Paul lived his life and that's what he taught people in the churches. But in this passage, Paul doesn't say, "You who are righteous and strong, mock and expel all those who disagree – those who, in their weakness, imagine that G-d cares about meat or special days." That's not what's happening at all. Instead, Paul says, "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions." Paul explains that we're going to disagree about lots of things in our life of faith, matters of personal practice, but that is not the be all, end all, essence of who we are. He says, "who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?" Remember that each one will be judged by G-d and trust that that is sufficient. In matters of personal practice, we can eat meat (or not) in honor of the Lord. We can worship on Sunday or Wednesday or any other day and still honor and give thanks to G-d.

We are not called to be judges, but servants in community with one another. We are not to condemn or despise one another, but to assess honestly what is happening. And so, these Bible verses challenge us to clarity and self-awareness. From there, we can try to see what is happening and gently admonish when we see a sister or brother out of step. From there, we can take a step back and wonder – does this difference of faith and opinion affect salvation or is it just a different practice that can still honor G-d? Is it something real or is someone choosing to eat their toast butter side down?

Paul admonishes us all, "we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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." That is why Christ came to us, lived for us, died for us and rose again – so that Christ could be the Lord of the dead and the living; so that Christ could be

our loving and merciful judge. We are accountable to G-d who is waiting to relieve and forgive us. Judge not and trust in the one who judges all. Amen.