

The Dignity of Difference
 Jeremiah 20:1-11a; Romans 14:1-17

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“Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another,” the Apostle Paul says to the church in Rome...and in Warwick... and in Minneapolis...”But resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.” (Romans 14:13)

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another.

That's a tall order in today's world of Internet trolling and social media take-downs. Passing judgment on one another – at least in American culture – has become a national pastime. Everyone does it, from the White House to houses of worship, from Wall Street to Main Street, and everywhere in between.

In my own experience as a preacher in an urban American congregation judgment comes in a variety of ways. A neighboring evangelical pastor sends me his books on Jesus, with a cover letter judging my sermons as inadequate. A parishioner takes issue with a comment I make about Palestinians and calls me anti-Semitic.

And, of course, I myself have fallen into the habit of judging others.

The first congregation I served was located in the heart of San Francisco and surrounded by many people living on the streets. One day the church door buzzer rang in the second floor office and a voice came over the intercom asking for help. We rolled our eyes; we had been through this many times and had heard so many phony stories.

I asked a staff member to answer the door; when she came back she said an unkempt, slightly frightening man at the door told her he needed \$10 for a prescription at the pharmacy around the corner.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I didn't have \$10, so I gave him a 20 and asked him to bring back the change.”

"You'll never see it," I said, judging him to be a con artist.

About ten minutes later the door buzzer rang again and the man's voice came over the speaker. To our surprise he was back with the change. The staff member went down and thanked him, and he thanked her.

No sooner had she come back into the office when the buzzer sounded again. It was the same man. His voice came over the intercom. "Love," he said, "Begins with trust."

It's a simple story, but it taught us a lesson in how easily we rob others of their humanity - mostly because we fear them.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another.

Your vicar assures me that never happens in Britain. I have read that England's success in the World Cup - the Garret Southgate phenomenon - has occasioned a ceasefire in the culture wars here, at least for the time being.

Actually, of course, what concerns the Apostle Paul happens everywhere. It comes with being human. Each of us is capable of demeaning others. Human nature has within it the capacity, maybe even inclination, to think and speak ill of others; Paul's words are meant to alert us to that reality and encourage us to rely instead on "the better angels of our nature" (President Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address) - or as Michelle Obama puts it, "When they go low, we go high."

That's what Paul's after - not uniformity of thought or opinion; disagreeing is fine - but, rather, he's pushing against the deeply-ingrained human propensity to divide ourselves into those we deem acceptable and those we judge as beyond the pale. When we give in to that tendency we're headed for trouble.

Political rhetoric in the U.S. these days provides us with ample illustration of this human inclination. Immigrants are labeled criminals. Muslims are deemed to be terrorists. Women are demeaned and diminished. African-Americans are assumed to fit racist stereotypes. Liberals are "elitists"; conservatives, "deplorables." Any hint of shared national purpose or empathy is tossed aside.

The Apostle Paul would not be pleased.

Many assume the recent American presidential election was determined by those "left behind" economically. Studies, however, show there were other forces at work, and the Apostle Paul would recognize them.

Researchers have identified what they call “group status threat” as a key factor in determining voter choice in the presidential election. Specifically, white Christian males as a group are experiencing “status shock,” as they find themselves losing dominance in the increasingly diverse American demographic reality.

Within about 25 years there will be no majority ethnic or racial group in America. The perception of impending cultural displacement can be terrifying for some. A candidate for office using openly racist language would find an eager audience in some quarters. (See: Niraj Choksi, *Trump Voters Driven by Fear of Losing Status, Not Economic Anxiety, Study Finds*; New York Times, 4/14/18)

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?” Paul asks. “Why do you despise your brother or sister?”

The politics being wielded in America today plays on fear, specifically, fear of “the other.” When we sense a threat to our identity or status from someone we have judged to be an outsider, we react in fear and begin to build walls, or worse. Policy based on religious prejudice acts out unfounded anxieties. Declaring immigrants criminals reflects fearmongering and denies the national narrative. Giving equal credence to those involved in neo-Nazi rallies and to participants in counter protests shows ignorance of history and fear of the other.

The Christian Church is certainly not immune to this dynamic. Studies show that 81% of white American evangelicals who voted in the recent presidential election were motivated less by their faith and more by fear of demographic shifts in the country. People are circling the wagons for protection.

I don’t know about Britain, but a kind of ugly tribalism has taken root in America, driven by fear of those not like us. The Christian Church sometimes finds itself encouraging this fracturing, at other times resisting it.

This is nothing new. Even in its infancy the Church had similar problems. The Apostle Paul encountered divisive trends every place he visited in his missionary travels. We read about it in his epistles – how to reconcile Jews and Gentiles, how to make peace with those following Greek gods and unknown gods and those following the Hebrew God, whether to welcome outsiders, such as those with different eating habits, as in today’s text.

Jesus himself spent his ministry pushing against barriers that had formed in his time, barriers that forced some out and allowed others in. At the heart of the ministry of Jesus was *concern for – not fear of –* the “other,” the “outsider,” the “stranger.” Jesus was, after all, a Jew, and had grown up hearing the narrative of his people: “You shall not oppress a stranger...for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

The fundamental ethic of our religion, from the start, is *love of the other*. Our faith instinctively rebels against the conclusion that anyone not like us does not share our common humanity and is, therefore, not deserving of dignity.

“The challenge of the religious imagination,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “Is to see God’s image in one who is not in our image.”

Sacks served as Chief Rabbi of the U.K. from 1991-2013. “The critical test of any order,” he says, “Is: does it make space for otherness? Does it acknowledge the dignity of difference?” (*The Dignity of Difference*; London: Continuum, 2003; pp. 60-61)

If the rabbi is right, then we are failing miserably. The dignity of difference is not a primary motivator for most of us. When we routinely do not recognize the full humanity of the other we are in trouble, particularly if that is true of our leaders. What seem to be passing political squabbles begin pointing in more sinister – possibly even lethal – directions. Tribalism left unchecked, especially when heavily armed as it is in America, can spiral into violence and chaos.

The prophet Jeremiah warns the people of sixth-century Israel that by mistreating the innocent among them, especially the children, they show how far from God’s intention they have wandered. He predicts that great upheaval is coming upon them, and they will be carried off into exile in Babylon. What would the prophet say to us today?

Have we forgotten that we, too, were strangers? Must we live in fear of those who are different from us? Does the commandment to love one another no longer hold? Does it not apply to everyone, including those beyond our own circles: the immigrant seeking a new home...the refugee fleeing violence...the homeless poor knocking at our doors?

Has our religion lost its ability to inspire and transform? Has our faith become complacent and, therefore, *complicit*?

As followers of Jesus *either we insist on the dignity of the other, or we join Peter in denying our Lord*. That may sound extreme, but these are not ordinary times, and there is a lot at stake.

Pursuing the justice of God often entails challenging the status quo. It may require us to resist and disturb the dominant ethos – and we may pay for it, as Jeremiah did. That path is difficult to take, especially for those who benefit *most* from the status quo.

Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote a letter from his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, addressed to “white moderates.” With their insistence on order, King said, white moderates – no matter how well-meaning – may have been a greater “stumbling block”

in the movement of African-Americans toward freedom than the openly racist Ku Klux Klan. When it came to seeking racial justice, too many white moderates, King said, were content to be a *thermometer*, simply recording and observing the social temperature, rather than a *thermostat* seeking to make real change.

The call to love the stranger among us will mean turning up the heat. We will find ourselves leaning into the prevailing winds of injustice. We will win no popularity contests.

And, remembering the Apostle Paul, as we stand up and speak out we must take care not to fall into the trap of judging others. If we do that we run the risk of repeating the cycle of seeing some as undeserving of the dignity due every person made in the image of God – even those with whom we disagree or of whom we are afraid.

By insisting on the full humanity of all, the Church offers a much-needed witness for justice and equity in our time. The future of our communities – indeed, of our world – may depend on it.

Advocating for *the dignity of difference* is a high and noble calling – and it begins in your life and in mine, in your city and in mine, in this congregation and in others like it, including the one I serve.

May God give us the courage we will need.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.