North Kildonan United Church

2nd July 2023 ~*Peter Latimer*

"Judge Not"

Romans 7: 15-25 Psalm 145: 8-14 Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

When I was about to enter high school in Ottawa, many years further back than I care to remember, an insidious concept, referred to as streaming was in vogue. Those graduating from Junior High were assigned to one of four streams upon beginning their high school studies, based primarily, I believe, on their marks in the last year of Junior High. Stream number five was designed for those with aspirations to eventually attend university, and featured the predictable subject matter of maths, sciences, English, history, along with subjects of more dubious value, such as Latin and German.

Stream number four was for those whose future plans were more uncertain, and presumably hadn't been as successful as the five streamers in junior high. For them, typing and Home Ec. or shops replaced those invaluable courses in Latin and German. Stream three, designed primarily for girls who had barely scraped through in Junior High, focused on clerical skills and business math. The belief was that they would be totally incapable of comprehending the intricacies of algebra and geometry. The boys who had struggled in Junior High were relegated to Stream Two, the industrial arts stream, where they attempted to become proficient in carpentry, auto mechanics or welding because, goodness knows, they would be totally baffled by trying to become proficient in French or by having to remember chemical formulas.

Predictably, these arbitrary assignments to one stream or another had a resounding impact on the social development of those caught up in this system. Back then, to my overwhelming embarrassment currently, I viewed myself and my classmates as superior to those in other streams, not only in terms of academic prowess but also in terms of social skills. I cannot recall forming a strong friendship bond with a single person from other than Stream five, at least until later in high school. The school administration certainly did its part to contribute to this, by sectioning the school off into separate wings. You guessed it, the clerical wing, the industrial arts wing, and the entitled brats wing (although it wasn't referred to as such, except perhaps by those in streams two and three.)

When I think back on it now, I wonder how many of those in Stream Three became high powered office managers, how many in Stream Two ended up owning their own successful plumbing business or service station and how many in Stream 5 were virtually unemployable after completing a university degree that prepared them for nothing in particular. Of course, streaming had nothing to do with intelligence or aptitude and everything to do with judgements based on pre-conceived biases.

Back in 1968, an educator named Jane Elliot conducted a famous experiment with her all-white elementary school students to introduce them to the experience of being black. Ms. Elliot told the students that those with brown eyes were innately superior to those with blue eyes, they were smarter, more likeable, and responsible. In the week that followed the brown eyed students exceeded their previous performance on classroom tests and other such exercises, but also became increasingly arrogant and bossy in their interactions with their blue-eyed classmates. On the other hand, those with blue eyes became increasingly timid, isolated and their classroom performance deteriorated.

What a profound impact comes from being judged negatively. If one week of judgement had such notable results on those judging and those being judged, in Jane Elliot's class, can you imagine the impact if those judgements were carried on over the course of years? It doesn't matter how intelligent, skilled, or congenial one is, if they are judged negatively over a period of time that intelligence, skill-set or interpersonal ability will be suppressed, perhaps never to be recovered.

Most of us would agree that on a rational level judging others is something we should avoid at all costs. Yet we judge one another constantly, don't we? *"She is such a gossip…she can't keep anything to herself."* Or *"He's such a phony…he's always pretending to be everyone's best buddy."* Or *"They are as dumb as a bag of nails…you have to explain everything to them three times before they get it."* Why on earth do we regularly fall into that trap rendering judgements that hurt the object of our derision while at the same time demean us who are so quick to judge?

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus admonishes those who would judge others. He refers to those accusing John the Baptist of having a demon inside him. Admittedly, John the Baptist wasn't cut from the same cloth as most in his time. He dressed in animal skins and lived in the desert eating grasshoppers. You can imagine us today encountering someone like that and saying to one another, *"What a wacko!"* and immediately crossing to the other side of the street if we saw him coming. Yet despite his appearance and habits, John brought an important message of what Jesus would bring to their lives and the importance of repentance. A message that could easily be overlooked if it was decided that John was possessed by demons.

Jesus also takes exception to how he is being judged. This time it is because he often shares a hearty meal with those who are outcasts in the Jewish society of the time, specifically tax collectors. In this passage, Jesus may be demonstrating the importance of being non-judgemental by seeking out those who are among the most reviled among the Jews and making a point of eating with them over a bottle of wine. He notes that he himself is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because he has sought out outcasts to socialize with.

Again, what is it that leads to us, like the Jews of Jesus time, making hasty judgements based on superficial appearances or behaviour? One factor, I believe, is when we view those we are judging as very much different than ourselves. A classic example is our forbearers' relationship with the indigenous community in Canada. Not only was their skin colour different, but their entire culture and belief system was foreign to the colonists. How could the settlers relate to people who dressed in the skins of animals who didn't recognize land ownership and who had many gods, all of whom were connected to the natural world? As we know, rather than trying to understand the indigenous peoples' beliefs, they viewed them as savages. Instead of trying to co-exist as two peoples in one land, their solution was, in the words of John A. Macdonald, "to take the Indian out of the child", the basis for the establishment of the infamous residential schools.

I have to believe that another reason for forming irresponsible judgements of others is to enhance one's own self-esteem. Perhaps that was operating in my early high school years when I was led to judge those in so-called lesser streams than my own. Here I was terrified at moving from a Junior High of a couple of hundred students to a high school of over two thousand. Nothing was familiar…new teachers, new classmates, not knowing where to find anything in that massive school. Worst of all, classwork for the first time in my school years was feeling like a struggle. All in all, I wasn't a happy camper. What a perfect breeding ground to begin judging those in the clerical or industrial arts streams. I would subconsciously be saying to myself, *"I'm having a really hard time with this high school stuff, but at least I'm way smarter than those guys in Stream Two. They wouldn't have a chance if they had to take geometry."*

Now even in those instances in which we view some commonality with an individual or a group who is disparaged by the majority in our peer group, isn't there a tendency to accept the negative judgement of the larger group, rather than risk being subject to negative judgements ourselves. When Peggy and I were at the Human Rights Museum recently, we spent some time on a display on the women of Saudi Arabia protesting their right to drive. The handful of women who initially protested by driving cars down the main streets were immediately arrested, imprisoned and some were even whipped. Even in a male-dominated society such as in Saudi Arabia, I cannot believe that many husbands of those women wouldn't be asking themselves, *"Why can't my wife drive? She's a smart woman, who caught on to driving very quickly. She would be a safer driver than all those men who drive like maniacs."* But did they stand up for their wives? Not a chance. What would their neighbours think if they started claiming that their wives were as capable as men in so many different ways. They would be ostracized forever.

I believe we also rush to judgements because our whole society tends to be

judgemental. There are so many safeguards put into place to ensure that it is the right people who participate fully in our society. Safeguards to ensure that only the most capable people are entitled to drive a vehicle…although I am bewildered at why a failure to be able to parallel park suggests an inability to drive a vehicle safely. Safeguards to ensure that only the most qualified are admitted to medical school…again what relationship does a 4.5 GPA have on one's ability to express empathy towards a patient diagnosed with terminal cancer. Safeguards to ensure all renters would be appropriate for tenancy in a new high rise…but does the fact that a potential renter just got hired at Great West Life mean that their unit won't become party central on the weekends. In other words, often such judgements bear little relationship to their purported purpose.

Later in today's Scripture reading, Jesus is quoted as saying, *"Come to me all who are heavy-laden and burdened, and I will give you rest."* Now, it seems to me, that this might be a call to us who have a tendency to rush to unmerited judgements to respond sensitively to the needs of those on the fringes of society who are so often the victims of those negative judgements.

And so how should we answer that call? I would suggest that we might follow the example of those in our congregation who have largely put aside their judgements and opened their hearts to those who are the victims of society's negative judgements. Those who volunteer to prepare and serve meals at West Broadway. Those who generously contribute to M&S or those other charities reaching out to those living on the fringes of society. Those who smile and wish a good day while handing a couple of loonies to those reduced to panhandling in the inner city. And those who examine their own hearts and ask God's forgiveness when they find themselves guilty of inadvertently judging others.

Let us remember there is only one stream, the stream of those whom God loves…and that is each one of us.

AMEN