

## ***Boulders and Specks***

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, February 9, 2020

Text: Matthew 7:1-5

Those of you who will be working as sandwich makers for the Valentine Tea later this morning will notice a new sign hanging in the kitchen. Actually, two new signs. I won't tell you where but you'll see them if you look for them. They both say the same thing: It's a drawing of two hands stretching out a hairnet with the caption, "Even Jesus wears a hairnet in this kitchen." Funny? Yes! Even the Ledge Light health inspector thought it was hilarious and also extremely necessary since hairnets really must be worn in our kitchen when folks are working to prepare food for this kind of an event. But this sign could also be problematic for several reasons. In some churches, for example, such a sign would be considered disrespectful, perhaps even sacrilegious suggesting as it does that Jesus pays attention to such mundane things as hairnets. This sign could also be problematic right here in our church since the issue it seeks to address has been greeted less than enthusiastically ever since the new CT health department regulations have been fully implemented here.

So, what we have here in the form of an innocuous sign now posted in our kitchen is a possible divisive situation. It's not – really it's not – but I need a relevant example right now and this one is close at hand so we'll imagine for the moment this is a

divisive issue here. Imagine, if you will, the pro-hairnet people and the anti-hairnet people poised to rumble over a key issue that could possibly threaten our much beloved Valentine Tea. What if the anti-hairnet crew refuse to wear their hairnets and the aunt of the health department inspector here for the Tea sees them in the kitchen without hairnets and texts her nephew who then rushes over and shuts down the Tea!!! Or, what if the pro-hairnet people end up arm-wrestling the anti-hairnet people in an effort to get them to wear the hairnets! Wrists are sprained and the sandwiches can't be made and the Tea is effectively shut down! All because of a disagreement over hairnets.

Sound silly? Yes, I agree. It is a silly example of what Jesus is talking about in today's text from Matthew's Gospel. And yet, I think it's a relevant example of Jesus' entire point in this brief excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount. This "sermon" is actually a long discourse or summary of a lot of Jesus' teachings which Matthew frames as happening within a sermon Jesus gave while standing on a tall hillside with crowds of people spread out below him down the hill. This "sermon" begins in Chapter 5 in Matthew and continues on through the end of Chapter 7. An important point to remember here is that the chapter and verse numbers in the Bible, including here in Matthew, were added much later in history to facilitate the study of the Bible. In other words, Jesus was not speaking these words imagining they would appear in the

written form in which we now read them. He was just talking with people, trying to explain how they could be in relationship with God in an entirely new way than they were used to.

So, what was Jesus talking about in this parable about logs and specks? He tells us right in the first sentence: “Do not judge so that you may not be judged.” He even tells us why we shouldn’t do this whole judging thing: “For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.” Dear friends, those are two of the most frightening sentences in the entirety of the Christian scriptures. Do not judge that you may not be judged. Sounds simple enough, but come on! Let’s face it – we all judge other people and situations all the time! Just look at Facebook for crying out loud. Facebook is filled with posts about judging people for everything from what they wear to what they say to the way they park their cars. Now I am not saying that we shouldn’t be peeved by folks who take up two parking spots in a crowded lot but publicly shaming them on Facebook? Really? That is judging someone else big time and that, Jesus says, is always wrong.

But why? Why is it wrong? Is Jesus saying we should just accept people as they are, however they behave, however rude or mean or perhaps even down right evil they are? No, of course not. A quick re-read of the Beatitudes makes that clear. So too does Jesus’ teaching of the “great commandment” which we sometimes

call the “Golden Rule.” It appears in this same Sermon on the Mount just a few sentences after this parable in verse 12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” Oh well, I try to do that, we think. Okay then, do you not see the judgment of others by you as wrong contained within this Golden Rule? It’s there! Think of it this way, do you want to be judged by others? Do you want other people who know nothing about you, nothing about the circumstances you are dealing with in a particular situation to be judging you, criticizing you? No? Who does, right? Then just don’t do it yourself. Simple. At least Jesus thinks it is. Well, maybe for him, we think.

That’s why it’s so great that Jesus gives us the answer about why this judging of other people is such a bad thing to do. It’s right there in verse 2: “For with the judgment you make you will be judged.” Uh oh. Then it gets worse! “And the measure you give will be the measure you get.” Ouch! There it is! There are some of the scariest words in the New Testament. The measure of judgement – of criticism – of second-guessing others – that’s the same standard by which we will be judged, and the same consideration we will be given – by God. By God! Wow. Sort of unnerving isn’t it? To think that the standards we use, consciously or unconsciously, for judging other people we encounter in our day to day life is the same standard by which God will someday judge us is pretty humbling, not to mention

unnerving. Truth is, this is the same standard by which God is judging us right now! Yikes! Dear friends, we are ALL in trouble.

Lucky for us Jesus once again gives us an answer or a work-around – a “hack” as millennials might say. And that hack is to approach each situation where we are tempted to judge someone else with an imaginative perspective. What we are to imagine is that our vision, our perspective, of this person we are about to judge is greatly impaired by a gigantic something stuck in our eye, literally obstructing a clear view of the person we are about to judge. Jesus calls it a log. In my sermon title I called it a boulder. Same difference. It’s some sort of big thing keeping you from seeing the entire person, the entire situation fully. Imagine, Jesus says, just imagine that you notice someone else has a tiny speck, an eyelash, in their eye and, wanting to be helpful, you offer to take it out for them. This is what we are doing when we judge someone else. We assume they have a problem and we know the answer. But, Jesus says in his example, you can’t even get close enough to help them because you have this giant log, this giant boulder, this giant thing keeping you from being able to assist with the removal of that speck. The thing is, Jesus says, the log obstructing your own vision prevents you not just from seeing the speck in the person’s eye. It’s really keeping you from seeing the whole person! How can you possibly help someone in that sort of situation? Simple. You can’t. You can’t help someone else with

their speck if your own log or boulder or whatever is getting in the way. The only way you can help is if you take the giant thing out of your own eye first.

Sounds simple enough. You can't help someone else if you can't see them clearly. You don't want to be judged harshly either which Jesus says is surely what will happen if we move forward with our judging of others. What we should do is definitely pretty clear. Don't judge other people. Just don't. Instead, put all that energy to work focusing on clearing up your own perspective, your own vision. Put your energies not into pouncing on other people you judge to be wrong or misguided or whatever. Instead, put your energies into improving yourself, your own vision, your own perspective, your own way of interacting with the world. Don't waste time judging other people! Improve yourself trusting that you can have a greater impact on making the world a better place just by changing your own perspective on people, on situations you encounter, on life in general.

So, if this is so simple, why is it so very hard to do? No easy answer here. It's difficult to do because it's difficult to do. If it was easy, anyone could do it and very few can do this when it's all said and done. And yet, doing this – this refraining from judging others – is exactly what Jesus says we need to do. Yikes! Now what? Our society at this moment seems to be fully committed to judging other people as swiftly and harshly and in the most mean-

spirited way possible and the consequences be damned! This past week and the multiple debacles in Washington made this all too abundantly clear. But, dear friends, Jesus is asking us to do better, to be better, to trust that new beginnings are always possible – even for the person you are most tempted to judge harshly. Jesus is telling us that God always invites us to move beyond judging to loving. God always asks us to move beyond criticizing to affirming. God needs us to move beyond divisiveness to reclaim our common identity as beloved creations of God. We say it every Sunday as worship begins in this church – no matter who you are or where you are on your journey of life and faith you are welcome here. Dear friends, that means everyone! Even the people who annoy us, irritate us, criticize us, and, yes, even those outside our walls who judge us for welcoming others they judge to be unworthy of God’s love. This is really, really difficult! But as my grandmother always told me, anything worth doing usually is difficult making the accomplishment of it all the sweeter.

Dear friends, the simple truth is that the only logs, the only boulders, we are responsible for are our own. We need to see the logs in our own eyes, the boulders blocking our own paths and focus on getting them out of the way with God’s abiding love, unending strength and boundless patience. We don’t need to waste any time judging what we think other people are doing

wrong. That, dear friends, is God's job and God's job alone. We need only work on clearing our own vision, unblocking our own path forward, so that we can each become the uniquely special person God created us to be. So, what do you say?? Let's go all in! Let's remove our logs, claim our hairnets and get to work on becoming the people, and the church, God needs us to be at this moment in time. Who's with me? Amen.