

Message – Eric Schrag

Luke 13:1-9, 31-35

When the boys were little, they would say “yike” instead of “like”. The other day I had my dad with me, and I pulled out the narrative lectionary that we are using during Lent and showed him the suggestion for today. He responded “I don’t yike it” – so now you know you are in for a treat 😊!

I will just say from the onset that I appreciate your patience and flexibility with me providing pulpit support during the Pastor search process. Lois’ original intent to have fewer hours hasn’t quite panned out since Caleb’s departure, so hopefully my presence up here in the coming months provides a little reprieve, and perhaps a few different ideas and perspectives for you to chew on throughout your week.

Ann did a great job with the children’s story, as she always does. Working so gracefully and patiently with children is a gift to be sure! Thank you, Ann. Part of the reason my dad wasn’t sold on the lectionary was the suggestion for the Children’s story this morning which said to ask the children the question – what does condemnation mean? Seems a lofty request for our little ones – my best succinct definition would be “critical judgement” when I think of the root word “condemn”.

The follow up question for the children was to be, “If bad things happen to someone, does that mean they deserve it?”. If you play the odds, we all know the answer to every Children’s story question is “Jesus”, followed closely by “love”...so of course the answer is no. It doesn’t take long to get into the minutia however and talk about “consequences” to behavior. Julianna and I were driving together to work on that snowy day. A truck went sailing by us. He was completely unsafe, going way too fast for the conditions. A little further down the road we caught up to him stuck in a snow drift. A confession here – I was elated. Like when people speed past you and never seem to get a ticket – Scott Erb! So yes, there are consequences to poor choices, but again a tough differentiation for children – and as a good Christian I should without a doubt not be relishing in someone else’s misfortune no matter how well deserved.

The final component of the Children’s story is to introduce a gavel and explain its use. This gavel then serves as one of the pieces of the display up front during the season of lent. I cannot see a gavel without immediately thinking of Matthew 7:1-5

<sup>7</sup> “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. <sup>2</sup> For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

<sup>3</sup> “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

But back to the gavel – clearly used by judges in handing down verdicts of guilt or innocence.

All in all, pretty weighty fodder for the children to tackle, and yet like every single church service, by and large the message. Scripture can be whittled down to the Children’s story – as Jesus knew his audience (no offense to any of us).

Like the scripture passage from Matthew I just referenced, like our scripture passage from Luke this morning, Jesus is clear that it is not our job to condemn others – period.

The title for today’s sermon from the lectionary is Christ Collides with our Condemnation.

Hopefully you were able to listen to Lois’s sermon last week – if you have not, I would encourage you to go back and listen. I continue to reflect on it myself. It was the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. Lois closed her message challenging each of us to ask ourselves which character we find ourselves resonating with, and then she honestly stated that for her, it is the lawyer. Coming to Jesus in some way expecting affirmation for having the correct answers, and the subtle righteousness that goes along with it. Then being reminded that if we authentically honor the greatest commandment to love God with our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves, we have a ways to go in embracing those on the other end of the spectrum – socially, politically, theologically.

A little aside: I showed my dad the lectionary and talked with him about the direction I was going with the sermon today. He said that it sounded a lot like the sermon he preached for the 500th anniversary of anabaptism at Bethel College Mennonite Church. He shared that sermon with me. Long story short – his sermon is a great follow- in small part for it’s similarities in direction and approach, and in large part because he provides the historical context for where we came from as Anabaptists and where we are in relation to faith and works.

Faith and Works - I would venture most of you have heard the description of the two different axis of the cross. The vertical axis of the cross - our faith is a direct personal relationship with God - Faith. I always think about the term “Throw up” music to describe praise music when I

think of the vertical axis. I know it is extreme, but for some reason it always comes to mind. Throw-up music -- a pun -- describing the “I” centered nature of the songs with text referencing the vertical faith -- me to God. Songs like “I love you Lord”, “Here I am to worship” etc., and for those who don’t appreciate that style of music -- “throw up” as in distasteful. The horizontal access of the cross on the other hand would be the communal nature of faith - the works. The corporate nature of our faith and worship, how we interact with one another, and it is in how we approach one another that we articulate our faith. Hymns, 4-part harmony would in some ways reflect the stylistic song metaphor -- though there are any number of our hymns, especially in the gospel tradition that are written from an individualistic perspective.

In Luke 13:1-9 Jesus is informed about a group of Jewish pilgrims from Galilee who were killed while offering sacrifices. He challenges the idea that the Galileans might have been more sinful and thus deserve such a fate. The idea that Jesus was challenging was the belief that the worse the sin, the worse the judgment. Seemingly speaking to the Old Testament notion of “an eye for an eye”. Jesus collides with this thinking and poses a different standard, one that is as radical today as it was then. He tells his listeners that regardless of the amount or nature of sin, everyone must repent. All must change their hearts and lives or suffer condemnation and death.

Then Jesus moves to the parable of the fig tree to illustrate that it is incapable of healing itself and incapable of self-justification. If the tree doesn’t respond to the care of the gardener and produce fruit, it will be cut down like the Galileans.

Think about this question. What are some examples prevalent in society today of the belief that “the worse the sin, the worse the judgment and self-justification? How can this belief seep into the church? (RE-read) My guess, regardless of political party affiliation you immediately went to politics.

When I initially read the question, I thought of politics and the societal components that have been vilified over the years and the things being vilified now. What can build you up more than tearing someone else down? If I condemn your behavior, especially when different than mine, how much more to make me feel like my behavior is appropriate...condemnation. In year’s past - Women voting, slavery, and you can fill in any number of things now. Unfortunately, those have been under the mantra of Christianity, and more directly for us in the “church”; divorce, tattoos, women in leadership, the list continues. If you have not been a part of that condemnation directly, I can almost guarantee your lineage was.

In 1950 my great aunt's daughter, a member of Eden Mennonite Church in rural Moundridge was getting married. For \$50 she bought her wedding dress. The dress had a train. In the Mennonite Church in the 1950's a train on a wedding dress was seen as "worldly". So her aunt removed the train from the dress – and in the much thriftier time in society - used the train to make a blouse for their first daughter. I am guessing like my wife and daughter, many of you were married in the Mennonite church in a wedding dress with a train. Could you imagine in 2025 potentially asking a member of a church to leave, or making them so uncomfortable they left, because of a train of material on their wedding dress?

We know from the very beginning that God is the master gardener. Very simply – we are to respond to the care of the gardener if we wish to produce fruit. If we do not respond to the care of the gardener, we will be cut down, or pruned. It was the one directive given Adam and Eve, and one they didn't follow, as a result "the fall", and our humanity.

As I said earlier, we so often hear from the pulpit that the Children's story could serve as the message and leave it there. So why don't we just stop with that? The title for today's sermon is Christ colliding with our condemnation. I believe and trust that God is our master gardener. If we follow the Gardener, we will indeed produce good fruit. The master Garden says do not condemn, do not judge.

Unfortunately, that is why it becomes hard for us supposedly "reasoned" beings to accept the Children's story at face value because what if **you** feel the Gardener is telling you women shouldn't be allowed to have trains on their wedding dresses, but **I** feel the Gardener is telling me that they can? We know the answer. Condemnation. Often condemnation under the auspices of good intent, often condemnation under the guise of doctrine. Condemnation that divides the church, ruins relationships, and even divides families.

I mentioned earlier the approach to the cross. Vertical axis vs. horizontal axis. I have been trying to wrap my mind around condemnation, especially today in the world, and in the church. I dearly love and respect friends and family who differ DRAMATICALLY from me on approaches to things and I can't understand it. Good faithful Christian brothers and sisters who are polar opposite in their views, responses, advocacy of certain issues. We see condemnation playing out in politics, we see condemnation playing out in churches and most of us are doing it as stated before, under the guise of Christianity.

I asked one of the smarter people I know – my poppa – how can people I respect advocate so much for things that I don't see lining up with Christ's teachings. He said without hesitation – a

vertical view of faith. If your relationship with God, your faith perspective is vertical. If you believe it to be the divine directive, then you are good – regardless of what others might say or think.

Does this imply that that approach is wrong – no – does it imply that approach is right – no. No more so than to say a strictly horizontal approach to faith is the right – caring solely for the relationship with others as approach to faith? What we know is that Christ was crucified on the cross. For a cross to fulfill its intended purpose it requires both the vertical and horizontal axis. It requires adherence to the Greatest Commandment – the vertical axis to “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength” and the horizontal axis to “Love your neighbor as yourself”.

The Galileans were killed for offering sacrifices, and how much easier is a black and white approach to condemnation. They sinned by offering sacrifices – offering sacrifices is on the bad list so the punishment fit the crime. Not so. Jesus turned things upside down. <sup>21</sup> “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder,<sup>[a]</sup> and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister<sup>[b][c]</sup> will be subject to judgment. Matthew 5.

In the second scripture read today the Pharisees warn Jesus to leave because Herod wants to kill him. The collision here surrounds Jesus’ death. Jesus knows what he will face in Jerusalem. He challenges Herod’s and the Pharisees’ authority to condemn him. He says their (man’s) authority to condemn him is an empty threat because they (we) lack the power to do so. Jesus makes the point that the ultimate power to condemn lies in his hands.

In a perfect world this would be a moot point because as good Christians we wouldn’t condemn, and we wouldn’t judge. This isn’t a perfect world and as Lois selflessly alluded to last week, we may wish to believe that we are the ones walking in the light, doing the right things, espousing the proper approaches but that is not what Jesus calls us to do. Jesus calls us to do better and to be better.

I had many talks with Pat Flaming about Christian accountability. Both of us trying to come to terms with holding one another, and others Christian’s accountable for their faith and beliefs. It often brings me back to another wise sage in my life, Gretchen’s dad, when we had this conversation. Her dad doesn’t talk a bunch, so when he does, we often listen, especially on

matters of faith. When posed with the Christian accountability question, he responded, "Well if you have a choice of choosing 'love' or choosing 'legalism' – I think the safe vote is 'love'". I think another way to approach it is Thomas Aquinas' quote: "Never deny, seldom affirm, always distinguish".

This is my best answer to the call to do better and be better. It is my response to Lois's question about which character we resonate with in the Good Samaritan story, and which we rather should. It is my response to how to deal with people I care deeply about who believe so dramatically differently on things. I should neither deny that there may be truth in what they are saying, nor should I affirm what they are saying...but together, with God's help, distinguish how we both can want the same thing and see different approaches to getting there.

This requires that we both listen, that we might make concessions, and in the end might not agree, but it does make for a much healthier, safer, and an optimistic opportunity to move together towards God's kingdom.

I get a weekly curiosity chronicle in my email. It started with my interest in learning a bit more about stoicism. The one I got on Friday referenced an old Native American story:

A grandfather takes his grandson on a walk to share his wisdom for life.

"A fight is going on inside me," he tells the boy. "It's a terrible fight between two wolves. One is bad, he is anger, fear, hate, jealousy, and envy. One is good, he is hope, kindness, joy, love, and optimism."

The boy asks, "Which wolf will win?"

To which the grandfather replies:

*"The one you feed."*

The reason I end with this story is a selfish one. It is selfish because when I reflect on my own judgements, my own condemnation of others, my own self-righteous behaviors I realize it is me feeding my bad wolf – anger, hate, jealousy and envy.

Regardless of the axis of the cross that you lean towards, we all can agree that we should feed our good wolf - the fruits of the spirit. If we can do this, we will much more likely produce the fruit that the master gardener is helping us to grow.