

Judgment: Discerning vs. Condemning

Here's one of the first lessons I learned as a young parish minister: When beginning a new pastorate, beware the first person who comes to you with the "dirt" on another member of the congregation. That person is likely to be your worst troublemaker.

Let me first acknowledge that there is a place for informed judgment, discriminate assessment, sound criticism, discernment, and circumspection in human affairs. It would be naive, unrealistic, and untrue to assume that every human being is of pure motive and guiltless behavior. We are on much firmer ground when examining actual behavior, however, than when we try to judge the motives and intentions of others. Moreover, though we can hardly avoid making judgments about the rightness or wrongness of others' words and actions, we must be careful to avoid caricature, slander, and self-righteousness.

I have often pondered Jesus' familiar teaching, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Matt. 7:1). I cannot believe that Jesus or anyone else would think that we can do away with judgment altogether. The issue, I believe, is whether we include in our judgments some kind of personal attack or condemnation, some form of character assassination, some attempt to do in another person while exalting or ingratiating ourselves. Jesus goes on to say, "Why do you see the speck that is in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" The answer, of course, is that our judgments are all too often clouded by self-interest and self-favoritism. As numerous psychological studies confirm, we tend to give ourselves lots of slack. We often hold others to standards that, by any objective measure, we cannot pass ourselves. We really need to keep an eye on ourselves, lest we fail to notice in ourselves the failings we find in others.

So beware when someone throws dirt, slings mud, and engages in personal attacks that tend to exalt self while bringing another down! You are probably hearing from someone who is a far worse offender than the person or persons he or she intends to impugn. More often than not, it seems, when persons engage in personal attacks they end up condemning the accused for the very sorts of things of which they themselves are guilty.

If you think there is an application here to our local and national political scene, I think you're probably right!

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