

Title: Judging Rightly
Text: John 7:14-25
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Immanuel Baptist Church
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Fred Craddock, when he was a New Testament and preaching professor, was often asked to speak in churches. At one church he was asked by a woman in the congregation: "While you're here are you going to preach on heaven and hell and judgment and stuff? Fred said, "Well, I hadn't planned on it. Is that important?" She said, "It is to me and my family." Fred said, "Well, I hadn't planned to do that." And she said, "Well, I just was hoping that you would."

Fred didn't pay any more attention to it until later in the week when she and her husband and children were leaving the church. A daughter stayed behind. She was 15 or 16 says Fred. Fred could tell she wanted to ask him something. Everyone was gone; her family out in the parking lot, but she stayed, kind of nervous, shifting from one side to the other. Finally she said, "May I ask you a question?" Fred said, "Yes." Her question was: "Will I go to hell for not wanting to go to heaven?" This pretty 16 year old girl asking Fred this kind of question sort of blew him away.

Fred said that he had to really pause and think about it. He had never used heaven and hell talk around his own kids. He told his son a time or two he was grounded, but didn't mean it any kind of ultimate sense. Fred said, "Why in the world are you asking that?" She said, "Well, my mother's real suspicious. Every time I come in she grills me: Where have you been? Who were you with? What'd you do? Every time I leave the house: Where are you going? Who are you going with? What are you going to do? When are you going to be home? All the time, very suspicious. The way she gets at me is: If you do this, you won't go to heaven! If you don't do that, you won't go to heaven! All the time, you won't go to heaven, you won't go to heaven! But what my mother doesn't understand is that I'm not interested in going to heaven." Fred said that he was really at a loss to try to answer her but he did get the connection between the mother's question and what the daughter had asked.

Can you imagine? This is an example of religion going askew. We have an example of this in our Gospel story today.

According to the Law circumcision was to take place on the eighth day after the child was born. If the day happened to be a Sabbath the Jewish leaders made an exception to Sabbath law and allowed the child to be circumcised. Jesus had healed on the Sabbath and they accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath. Jesus says, "What's more important: Keeping the circumcision law or making a person whole? Stop judging by mere appearances, but

instead judge correctly” (NRSV, “rightly”). Don’t judge by appearances says Jesus, judge rightly.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) came into existence when a number of more moderate Baptists broke away from the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). We broke away because the SBC completely excluded us from denominational life and exercised a very rigid control over the seminaries and all denominational institutions, getting rid of all people who didn’t conform to their doctrine or practice. But I have been very discouraged by the words of Executive Director, Daniel Vestal as reported in the August issue of Baptists Today.

Dr. John Killinger was featured in one of the break out sessions at the National Convention in June. Apparently Killinger offered a perspective on Christ that stirred up some people. This is nothing new. Dr. Killinger wrote the book: “Ten Things I Learned Wrong from a Conservative Church.” He is more controversial than I am. (Some of you may remember that Killinger spoke here at Immanuel the year that we hosted the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship annual meeting.) In response Daniel Vestal said, “If we had known then what we know now about his Christology, he would not have been invited.” That disturbs greatly as a member of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

The issue is not whether the majority agree with Dr. Killinger. So what if the majority rejects his views? Killinger’s views represent a minority view within the CBF, and that’s the very reason he should be given a hearing. It was all voluntary. No one had to go to his sessions. He was not part of the main program. But because he spoke his mind and said some things in his break out sessions that did not conform to the views of the majority Daniel Vestal has said that he and his kind will not be invited back. That sort of narrowness is why we left the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship had the opportunity to be different, to set a different course, to be more inclusive and welcoming of diversity. It may be time for us to give some thought to more diverse Baptist groups like the American Baptist Convention or the Alliance of Baptists who have a history of diversity. It’s something to think about.

Jesus says, “Do not judge according to mere appearances, but instead judge rightly.” Be discerning.

One of the ways we need to appropriate this is in the way we interpret our sacred Scriptures. I was engaged in an email conversation this past week with an individual who said (this wasn’t the main topic of our conversation, but it came up) that Marcus Borg was arrogant. Marcus Borg is a biblical scholar who specializes in Jesus studies. I’ve read all of his books. I don’t agree with everything he says, but I have a great deal of respect for him and has certainly stimulated my thinking. At no time did I ever feel that he was arrogant in

his presentation. So I took offense at what my conversation partner said about Dr. Borg. I soon discovered why he didn't like him. He said that Borg picks and chooses what he likes out of the Bible; that he edits the Bible according to his own interest.

Well, we all edit the Bible. We all do this. None of us assigns equal weight or authority to all the Scriptures. For example, 1 Timothy 2:11-15 says, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. (Now listen to the theological reasoning). For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." And then, as if the writer is offering some consolation he says, "But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety."

What if we gave that Scripture authority in our church? Naomi wouldn't be here. Lisa wouldn't be here. We wouldn't have women deacons. We wouldn't have women Sunday school teachers. We wouldn't have women ministry team leaders. We wouldn't have a church if we took that passage seriously, which obviously we don't. We edit the Scriptures. Even those who say they don't edit the Bible really do. They don't give every Scripture equal authority. The issue is not whether or not we edit the Scriptures, the question is: How we edit the Scriptures? What principle/s do we use to edit the Scriptures? That's the issue.

I think this passage gives us some insight and direction. In verse 17 Jesus says, "Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own." Anyone who chooses to do the will of God, says Jesus, should be able to discern what is from God. What is the will of God? Jesus summarized this when he said that the whole law and the prophets hang on two commands: Love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself. And lest we try to find a loophole Jesus went on to define our neighbor as our brother and sister in the human family. Our neighbor even includes our enemies. In other words, if we choose to love, then we should be able to discern what Scriptures are valid and which ones are invalid. If we are compelled and immersed in the love of God then we should be able to discern which Scriptures promote love and which Scriptures do not.

When Jesus healed on the Sabbath he violated the dominant interpretation of Sabbath law. Why did he do that? Because healing was the loving thing to do. To be able to heal and refuse to heal out of conforming to the law would not have been the loving response. The law of God was not intended to be read that way.

Jesus reinterpreted the Sabbath law and made it conform to love. Jesus showed us that we must read Scripture with a prejudice toward love. Theologian Peter Rollins puts it this

way: “Jesus came to teach us a way of life that is dictated by the radical excess of love rather than (by) an ethical rulebook.”

The questions we need to ask of the Sacred Text are: Will the application of this text as it reads promote authentic love for God and love for my sisters and brothers? Will it lead to a world that is more equitable, just, peaceful, generous, and kind? Will it promote renewal and reconciliation of relationships? Will it lead us to stand with the marginalized and stand up for the disadvantaged? Will this make me a better person and make our community a better community? Do not judge by mere appearances says Jesus, but judge rightly. The principle of love must be the criterion by which we judge the Scriptures.

The principle of love must also be the criterion which we apply to our relationships. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” There Jesus is talking about the condemnation of others. There is no place for condemnation in the Christian community. There is a place for discernment, but there is no place at all for condemnation.

Tony Campolo tells about the time when he pastored a small church in a rural community. One day he found himself chatting with a young woman in his community who was pregnant, but not married. And she was feeling like an outcast in that little, rural town. Campolo had the wonderful opportunity of sharing with her about the grace, acceptance, and forgiveness of God and she received with joy that good news. She started coming to his church. But then, she stopped as suddenly as she started. He went to see her and to invite her back. She said, “I can’t. Every time I go into that church I get the feeling that I’m dirty and no good.” Campolo reminded her of the truth of the gospel, that Jesus didn’t see her that way; that Jesus had forgiven her and accepted her and had forgotten her sins. Her response was: “Jesus may have forgiven and forgotten, but the people down there at your church haven’t forgiven and they haven’t forgotten.” What an indictment against the church!

There is no place for condemnation among the followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus says, “Judge not.” But here when Jesus says “Judge rightly” he is saying, “Be discerning.” There’s a difference. “Do not condemn, but be discerning.”

When it comes to the Bible we need to use discernment and judge rightly in interpreting and applying the sacred Scriptures to our lives and our faith community. And when we relate to our brothers and sisters at work, at leisure, in the church—wherever—we need to use discernment, we must be directed by love and seek their good.

Let us be a discerning people and let us judge rightly.

Gracious Lord,

May your love for the world guide and give direction to all that we do. May it dictate how we read and interpret the Bible. May it oversee and direct how we relate to one another. May it instill insight and wisdom so that we will be discerning. O God, may our lives and our church be filled with your goodness and saturated with your love so that when we decide what to do with do so motivated by love, sustained by love, and having love as our goal and purpose. Amen.