LEARNING THE WAY: A series on the Sermon on the Mount
“Sound Judgment”
Psalm 96: 1-2 and 10-13 and Matthew 7:1-5
Covenant Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 12, 2107
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For the past four weeks, we have been reflecting on passages from the Sermon on the Mount, the collection of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. You’ve heard about: What it means to be blessed; Loving your enemy; Not being a hypocrite, doing things for the right reasons; Coveting and contentment and enjoying each day.

Jesus shared these teachings to help his followers develop a new identity, to help them live differently, to help them discover “the way”—God’s way.

My hope is that as members of this church, as Christians, we too would be learning from Jesus about this way, so we can be living as new people, making a difference out there.

Today our focus is on judgment. Before we get to human judgment, let’s start with God’s judgment.

While there certainly are Bible teachings about God’s anger at human sin, and while many people think primarily of God as a stern judge, looking to punish us for our sins, Psalm 96 is one of many teachings about God’s mercy.

John 3:16-17 makes it clear that Jesus came into the world not to condemn, but to save.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

And in the beginning of the ten commandments, in Exodus 20 we find an intriguing passage, reflecting God’s anger at human folly, along with God’s much greater desire for mercy:

I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

So it seems to me that God is concerned and even sometimes angry at our sin, with occasional threats of punishment, but the overriding message is mercy and forgiveness. By mathematical standards God is somewhere between 250 and 333 times more focused on showing steadfast love.

As for human judgment, many of us know that Jesus said “do not judge” and so we think being judgmental is bad. But just a few verses later, Jesus suggests that sometimes we do have to
make judgments. He gives us guidance on how to make those judgments carefully and well.

Listen for God’s word:

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

We humans are very good at seeing the faults of other people. We’re very good at being judgmental toward others. We’re so good in fact there are probably people here right now who are thinking about all the judgmental people in their lives but not thinking about themselves.

Sometimes when I’m driving, I see someone running a red light, and I shake my head with disdain at “that fool.” More frequently than I’d like to admit, I realize just minutes later as I think I can sneak through the light as it changes that I am “that fool.”

Sometimes at home, I see dishes on the kitchen table, and I get irritated that someone just left them there. And then realize that they are mine.

In church, we can be very good about judging

Carol Howard Merritt, an author, blogger, and pastor was a featured speaker at a conference I attended a few years ago. She was talking about church and money, saying how she, like a growing number of younger people, rarely carries cash and doesn't write checks. She does most of her financial transactions with her phone.

She shared a story about visiting a congregation for the first time. During the offering, she got her phone out to find the church website, with the hope of a "donate now" button on it.

As she was doing this, she sensed the eyes of some people in the congregation were on her. She imagined them thinking: "Not only did she NOT put anything in the offering plate, but she's playing with her phone during church!

When we make judgments, we usually don't know the whole story. Sometimes we jump to conclusions and we assume the worst about other people. This is what we call being judgmental, the bad side of judging.
Years ago, when people first started using email, several people share a prayer with me. I haven't seen it for years, but it's worth sharing today:

*Loving God,*

*Help me remember that the jerk who cut me off in traffic last night is a single mother who worked nine hours that day at minimum wage, who was rushing home to cook dinner, help with homework, do the laundry and spend a few precious moments with her children.*

*Merciful God, help me to remember that the pierced, tattooed, disinterested young man who can't make change correctly is a worried 19-year-old college student, balancing his apprehension over final exams with his fear of not getting his student loans for next semester.*

*Remind me, Lord, that the scary looking bum, begging for money in the same spot every day (who really ought to get a job!) is a vet, struggling to survive, who is a slave to addictions that I can only imagine in my worst nightmares.*

*Help me to remember that the old couple walking annoyingly slow through the store aisles and blocking my Christmas shopping progress are savoring this moment, knowing that, based on the biopsy report she got back last week, this will be the last year that they go shopping together.*

*Heavenly Father, remind us each day that, of all the gifts you give us, the greatest gift is love. It is not enough to share that love with those we hold dear. Open our hearts not just to those who are close to us but to all humanity. We thank you that you forgive us and love us, even with all our faults and mistakes. Help us be slow to judgment and quick to forgiveness and patience and compassion and love. In the name of Jesus we pray AMEN!*

So clearly we need to avoid being judgmental.

But we still have to make judgments. Not all judgments are bad. Often a judgment can be helpful. If I’m doing something foolish, or if I’m going in wrong direction, I would hope my family and friends would not keep silent for fear of being judgmental, but rather my hope is that they would offer kind, gentle, and honest words, and that I would have the grace and clarity to hear them.
Life is complicated and we have to judge in situations and figure out how to respond:

- When conflict arises in families, especially as parents
- When ethical questions arise at work or school or wherever
- When we hear something that seems untrue, whether said by a family member, a neighbor, a pastor, an elected leader
- When we see someone injured by the side of the road, and we know we are called to love our neighbors.

Jesus told his disciples to take the plank out of their own eye before trying to make a judgment. What fascinating imagery.

I contacted two eye doctors I know who are members of this church. One is actually in India leading a group of ophthalmology residents. The other shared with me the wide variety of things that can get in someone's eyes: from eyelashes to dirt, to glass, metal, and chemicals.

He didn’t mention planks or logs.

We value eyesight and obviously with a plank in your eye you can’t see anything.

Jesus' language was intentionally exaggerated, calling us to make sure our vision is as clear as possible before we try to judge, or help someone else.

We get guidance elsewhere in scripture. In Matthew 18, there is a well-loved passage where Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered together, I am there with them.” Jesus actually said that in the context of community, where a member is engaged in some sort of wrong behavior.

15 “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses…. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Sometimes we need to help each other to see things clearly about ourselves and about others.
And in Ephesians 4:15, the apostle Paul encourages us to “speak the truth in love.”

Oh that we could hear the truth in love, about ourselves first, and then be able to speak the truth—gently, carefully, and lovingly—with each other.

Through the life and teachings of Jesus, God uses sound judgment with us, calling us to turn away from sin and calling us into a new identity and new way of living.

Our task is to hear and receive God’s sound judgment on us, that we know we are not perfect, that we are indeed sinners who are forgiven, who are finding the way to new life.

As we hear and believe this transforming good news, then humbly, carefully, and gently, we can have sound judgment in our daily living. Amen.