
Lent: Give up being judgmental
Chapel in the Park United Church
April 6, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 12:1-8

The story we just read from the Gospel of John is certainly a famous story. In fact, it might be 4 famous stories. Because biblical scholars cannot agree on how many versions of the story there are. This is one of the few Jesus stories that is found in all 4 of the gospels. But there are differences between the different versions of the story. Which means that each of us are invited to decide for ourselves whether the 4 stories represent 4 different events. Or 4 different tellings of a single event. Or perhaps something else altogether. It's just so exciting!

[image: woman anoints jesus]

All 4 gospels record a story of Jesus being in a house, and sharing a meal with his closest friends and disciples. And while that is happening a woman pours expensive perfume on Jesus. And someone complains. In 3 of the gospels, the event happened in the city called "Bethany". In one gospel, the location is unnamed. In Matthew and Mark, the home in question belongs to Simon the leper. In Luke the home belongs to a pharisee named Simon. In Matthew and Mark the woman is unnamed. Which is very ironic since both accounts end with the line, "wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her". I mean, how can she be remembered if we don't even know her name? In Luke, the woman is unnamed but we are told she is a local person. In John, the woman is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. In paintings and iconography, however, the woman has been made to be Mary Magdalene, supporting the idea that she was a "sinful woman". In Matthew and Mark the perfume is poured on Jesus's head. In Luke and John the perfume is poured on Jesus's feet. In Matthew, Mark, and John, the woman's actions are objected to because they are seen as a waste of money. Money that could have been used to help the poor. In Luke the woman's actions were not actually objected to. What was objected to was that Jesus let a "sinner" touch him so intimately.

The version we just read, from John, was written about 50 years after Mark and Matthew were written. Which may explain why we have the specific condemnation of Judas. It is very interesting to me that there is a lot of confusion between the Marys in these stories. And yet they are all simply called, “Mary” or left unnamed. But John takes no chances and names Judas fully, as “Judas Iscariot”. Even though there are no other Judases in the gospels. Over time, people clearly came to hate Judas. But perhaps that’s another story.

[image: sleeping in church]

Now I hope that some of you have enjoyed learning one or two interesting things about this famous gospel story. And I hope that some of you are starting to become a bit irritated that I am rambling on sharing statements that - while true - do not seem very useful. And if we are honest, are not even particularly interesting. And I hope that some of you have stopped listening to me altogether. I mean - who cares how many of the stories name the town in question as “Bethany” anyway? The story is obviously about Jesus being anointed before his death. What possible difference does it make whether Jesus was anointed on his head or his feet? Either end will do, right? And who cares about the identity of the woman 2000 years after the fact. Whoever she was, she is long dead now. Why is Rev. Paul boring us like this?

Why am I boring you like this? Because I have been trying to bore you a bit. Because I was hoping for you to be reminded - in a small way - of what it feels like to be judgmental. And so, I wanted you to judge me negatively. Just a bit. So I tried to bore you all for a few minutes. Did it work? If it did not work, I can certainly try harder some other time! I wanted you to remind yourself what it feels like to be judgmental to help relate to the gospel story today.

And if I failed to make you judge me, here is an image that will probably generate some judgment for all of us. It’s just someone trying to launch a boat at a boat ramp. But I dare you not to judge the driver of the pickup truck who is pulling the boat. Are you ready?

[image: failed boat launch]

How did you do? Be honest. How many of us just thought the words, “what an

idiot”. It is very easy for us to be triggered into judgmental reactions. And if you did not judge the driver of the truck negatively, I’m glad I never lent you my boat.

[image: woman anoints jesus]

In the gospel story, some person does something loving for Jesus. And without hesitation, someone else judges that person negatively. Without even pausing to think of what the person’s intentions or motivations were. And it typifies human nature that we know exactly who the complainer was, while we have long since lost track of who the loving person was. Sound familiar? That’s what “being judgmental” is all about. We fixate on the negative while ignoring the positive. And then we wonder why we are not more happy in life! Humans are a strange lot indeed.

[image: you know my name]

I want to pause for a moment. Because we need to be clear on the difference between two things. Namely, “being judgmental” and “being discerning”. Some people have been told that they are too judgmental (who hasn’t?) and therefore have formed the idea that it is bad to judge at all. Is it always wrong to judge others? Is it always wrong to judge ourselves? If we are not supposed to judge things, how are we to know right from wrong?

The answer is that being judgmental is bad, but being discerning is good, right? But what’s the difference? And how do we decide when we are being judgmental and when we are being discerning?

Well, believe it or not, it’s not that complicated. Really. The good news is that it is easy to tell the difference between being discerning and being judgmental. The bad news is, in order to tell the difference, you need to be discerning, not judgmental.

So here’s my own patent pending technique to separate being judgmental from being discerning. And I’d love to hear your own ideas over coffee time after service.

[image: pushing others down]

Being judgmental comes from our own desire to make ourselves feel better, or superior, by pushing other people down. By ridiculing others. Being judgemental is using someone else’s choices to pat ourselves on the back. Being judgmental is creating fictitious barriers to protect ourselves from falling into the traps that we push other people

into. Being judgmental is - ironically - always about us and never actually about the other person. Being judgemental therefore takes very little mental effort. Just ignore the fact you have no idea what's actually happening, and blast someone for being "so stupid". That's what happened in our gospel story, where Judas does not bother to find out what the woman had in mind. He just criticizes. I could give more examples of judgmental behaviour. But I have a feeling that we all know lots of examples ourselves.

[image: pushing down or pulling up]

Being discerning, on the other hand, is driven by a desire to make reality better, for others or for ourselves. Being discerning involves humility, paying attention to context, asking people what they are doing, feeling, hoping for. Being discerning requires deep listening. Being discerning takes actual effort. And is truly driven by the desire to help other people, or ourselves. Being discerning requires stepping back from a situation and creating space for wisdom to emerge.

[image: how you make others feel about themselves say a lot about you.]

So the shorter way to explain this is simple. When we try to push someone down, that's being judgemental. And when we try to lift someone up, that's discerning. And that method works even when we ourselves are the person that we are pushing around.

I could simply say that we should all give up being judgmental during Lent and leave it at that. But I won't. Because instead I want to call us during Lent not only to give up being judgemental. But also, to become more discerning. Becoming more discerning in our own lives - about our own lives - may help those of us who struggle with family or friends who consistently let us down.

[image: trust is conditional]

I say that because in practice it can be difficult to separate being judgmental from being discerning. Particularly in our relationships. Because in relationships our own sense of reality can become less clear. We sometimes expect more from a relationship than the relationship can actually support. What happens if those people do not reciprocate our love, or in fact shun us or even abuse us? We want to love unconditionally. But we sometimes discover that the relationship we want to value so much simply cannot carry the freight. At least not in the present moment.

[image: unconditional love does not mean ...]

We need to learn how to discern functional from dysfunctional relationships. We need to learn to give ourselves permission to discern the difference between healthy and unhealthy behaviours. We need to be able to recognize that unhealthy behaviours are unhealthy. We need to accept the unbelievable fact that we deserve peace. And yes, we do deserve peace. The peace of God that passes all understanding. All of us deserve that. Being judgmental will not get us there. Being discerning will work much better for finding peace.

[image: people believe bad things]

There is another strange feature of being judgmental. Fundamentally, being judgmental is a rejection of the present moment. Being judgemental is the strong belief that what is right in front of your face - today - is inadequate. It needs to be changed or fixed. Of course, many times in our lives there are things that need to be fixed. I would never deny that. But some people have practiced being judgmental for so long, that they find it hard to connect with the present moment. Ever. Constantly fantasizing about a future that will be better usually means that we are not fully present right now. What is your relationship with the present moment? Are you here? Are you fully here? Do I need to re-create the cabin in our midst from March 23¹ so that you can be fully here?

[image: flights cancelled]

Picture this scene. You are at the airport, waiting to get on a plane. You are in a huge lineup that appears to be going nowhere. You can just see the notice board that shows that flights are being cancelled. The longer you wait in line - going nowhere - more and more flights are being cancelled. You decide that the airport staff are incompetent. They should all be fired. You vow that you will never use this airline again. The situation is terrible, right?

No, the situation is neutral. The reality is simply this - you are standing and you are breathing. You yourself are creating a narrative that makes your situation terrible. The situation is neutral, but you are lost in the future, not being in relationship with the present moment.

¹ We did a live experiment during the sermon on Mar 23, 2025 about finding peace in our lives.

[image: missed flight]

Now I'm sure that some of you will object to that example. I know that Marjorie will. Of course it's a disaster if you miss your connecting flight, right? Well, let's talk about that with each other over coffee time today. And yes, I realize that it is very easy to justify why we should constantly worry about the future.

But before we get to that coffee, consider this. People who are not present today because they are fixated on some better future will miss that future anyway.

[image: watching sunset]

Consider this person. They have been waiting all week for a break, and hoping for a beautiful sunset. Which they now have. But here's what's really going on.

[image: watching sunset with a todo list]

Now that the person is on their break, complete with the sunset that they were looking forwards to, they are already fixated on their todo list and some mythical future. People who are not present today because they are fixated on some better future will miss that future anyway. Because when that future becomes the present, they will not be there - they will be lost in some other future.

For example, it's Sunday today. Perhaps you are not emotionally present now because you are fixating on the perfect Monday. But tomorrow - Monday - you will not be fully present either. Because on Monday you will be fixating on the perfect Tuesday. Believe me, some people live their whole lives like this. Never being in the present moment.

[image eckhard tolle quote]

Make peace with the present moment, because that is all that you ever have. The peace of God, the grace of God, exist in the present. Being judgemental removes us from the present moment, which is where God - and grace - and peace - are to be found. So, this Lent, give up being judgmental and become more discerning. Here. Now. We cannot find peace in our lives if we are not in the present moment.

[image: "The poor you will always have with you" ... Jesus]

Now in case all this talk about living in the present moment sounds too strange for you, I want to close with one other aspect of the gospel that is very down to earth and

practical. If the message so far has been too heavenly-minded for you, here's a much shorter practical perspective.

Jesus said, "the poor you will always have with you". Some people hear those words as if Jesus is resigned to the fact that societies will always have people that we call "poor." So we should not lose any sleep trying to eradicate poverty because it is inevitable. Some people hear those words as if it is God's will that some people are poor. Which might make them feel better when they walk past a homeless person on their way to the Porsche dealership.

But if we just read a tiny bit more of the text we get, "the poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me." Jesus was reflecting on how short his own time with his friends was. He was not saying that poverty is an intractable social ill that God ordains. And if that's not clear enough, in Mark's version Jesus says, "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want, but you will not always have me."

[image: but you will not always have me. ... Jesus]

The down-to-earth, practical version of this sermon is this. Discern that all people are children of God. All people. All people. And for Lent, find new and creative ways to engage with people who have even less security than you do. Who knows? You might find Christ in your midst. You might even be as Christ for someone else.

Peace be with you. Not later. But now.

Amen.