

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Welcoming Together
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
September 6, 2020

Ecclesiastes 3:16-17; Romans 14:1-12

The rules were clear, and it was also clear that he had violated every one of them. Before the beginning of every presbytery meeting, meaning the meeting of local Presbyterian churches, the moderator goes through the rules in order that all the commissioners know what is and is not appropriate during discussion and debate. The basic rules are 1) that the commissioner addresses the moderator and not the assembly, 2) speaks for or against the motion being discussed and 3) makes no personal attacks. People are usually respectful of these rules, but this person decided they did not apply to him. First, he turned his back on the moderator and addressed the assembly. Second, he did not speak for or against the motion. Third, he attacked the makers of the motion. He made it clear that whoever had written this motion had done so for nefarious reasons, that they were being dishonest and that they were no good, low-down varmints...ok so those are my words characterizing his attack. Over the years I have reflected on that attack and it dawned on me this week that this individual had had a sudden recurrence of one of humanity's most prevalent viruses...and that is, judgementalitis.

Yes, that's right. He had a recurrence of judgementalitis. What is judgementalitis you might ask? It is the unstoppable desire to judge and despise others. There is no blood test for this virus. You can't stick a swab up the nose or draw some blood. It is a virus that one can diagnose by its primary symptom. Though we may think we know the primary symptom, I want us all to be clear on what that symptom is and is not. I will begin with what is not the primary symptom. The primary symptom is not disagreement. People can disagree with one another without being judgmental. People see the world in different ways through different lenses and so they can disagree about any number of things. In fact, one of the great beliefs of our Reformed tradition is that people of good will can legitimately disagree. So, what is the primary symptom of judgementalitis? The primary symptom is, in the Apostle Paul's words in verses three and ten, "despising" the other; meaning making a judgement about another that the other is less than nothing. What I mean by this is that a disagreement becomes not about the issues but about the character of the other. We decide that another individual is less than nothing, which is the Greek definition of the word translated despise, meaning that individual is not worthy of love, care or compassion. These declarations of less than nothingness can be based on everything from a person's political beliefs, to their religious affiliation, to the color of their skin, to the language they speak, to the nation in which they were born, who they love, how they dress, the level of their education or to any other attribute which we don't like.

It might be nice to pretend that judgementalitis is a recent virus, but it is not. I say this because it infected the church at Rome. We can see this clearly when Paul spends most of this

part of his letter telling the people not to judge. Though he speaks in general terms about not judging and not despising one another, he mentions two topics over which people are judging one another. The first has to do with eating meat. Some Christians only ate vegetables, and some ate meat. The disagreement in this case is not about which is better for you physically, but which is better for you spiritually. What I mean by this is that since most of the meat Romans ate would have been sacrificed to the gods, some Christians believed that by eating meat, they were being unfaithful to Jesus. Others said meat was meat and it didn't matter. Unfortunately, this disagreement led each side to despise the other; to see the other as less than nothing. The other issue had to do with when people worshipped. Some people said you worship on one day and others on another day. Again, these disagreements led to each side despising the other...and if we read between the lines, led to the church being torn apart, for that is what judgementalitis does, it tears apart churches, families, communities and nations.

I don't know if you have noticed, but there has been a sudden nationwide outbreak of judgementalitis. We have become a nation in which those on the "other side" are not simply people with whom we disagree but are people whom we can despise. To see this all we need to do is listen to much of the political advertising and discourse that is tearing this nation apart. It is not about policy but about the person. And it is helping to spread judgementalitis to more and more people. I say this because it has infected me. I find myself thinking and saying things that I know are judgmental. And with each passing day it is harder and harder and harder to disagree and not despise. Maybe this is not your story, but if it is, the question becomes, is there a cure? Is there a surefire vaccine to inoculate us from this virus? Unfortunately, the answer is no, there is not. However, there is something we can take in order to lessen the symptoms. And that is the bread and the cup at the table of Christ.

I say that taking the bread and cup help to diminish the symptom of judgementalitis because when we eat and drink at this table, we are reminded that Christ died for all of humanity. Jesus gave his life for Donald Trump and Joe Biden, for Gary Peters and John James, for red states and blue states, for Democrats and Republicans, for socialists and free marketers, for people of all languages, religions, races, sexual orientations, economic levels and abilities...for all of us. And in so doing Jesus declared that none of us is to be despised, none of us are less than nothing, but that we are all loved. We are all one family, with one parent, God above, who is the Lord of all.

My challenge for you this morning then, is, as you come to the table, to envision those whom you have despised and see them standing at the table next to you; see them receiving God's love and mercy, even as we receive it. Then, watch for the symptoms and as they arise, and come back here, to the table, again and again and again.