

Sermon for Sunday, February 3, 2013 Luke 4:21-30, I Cor 13:1-13 "The Judging Business"

It was in the supermarket on a Friday morning. I was idly picking over the produce, figuring out what I would bring home for dinner, when I heard a wail behind me. I turned, and there was a mother with a toddler in the shopping cart. The little one was trying to escape and the mom was desperately trying to get her to stay put. "No, sweetie. You don't want to fall out. Mommy needs you to stay in the cart." "Want OUT!!! Want OUT!!!!" the little one howled. I felt bad for the mom – I had been there myself a few times when my children were little, and there is nothing quite as embarrassing and frustrating as when you cannot get your child under control and he or she is screaming bloody murder.

To my left, an older woman was sighing melodramatically. "If she can't keep that child quiet, she shouldn't bring her into the store. It's aggravating!"

She turned to the mother and said "You don't belong in here if you can't shut her up." The mother wheeled the cart away from the produce aisles, her face as red as a tomato, as she tried to escape the judgment of the other woman.

Judging...it's a behavior we turn to more often than we should. We could make the point that none of us should ever judge anyone else, that only God has the right to judge, but from a practical standpoint, we do occasionally judge, whether we are on a jury or are inspecting our teenager's supposedly cleaned room. Still, judgment is dangerous business, because we often do it without all the data to make a wise verdict.

That may be some of what is going on in today's Gospel. Jesus, as we remember from last week, is in his hometown, and he has just stunned the people in the synagogue by proclaiming that he is the embodiment of the prophecy about the Messiah. And how do the listeners respond? At first, they seem to be amazed by his words, and are especially amazed because this is someone whom they have known all their lives, a local boy. But something in the air must have shifted, because Jesus seems to react badly. He challenges them: "I'll bet you don't believe me. I'll bet you want to see miracles that will prove to you that I am who I say I am. You are judging me, even though you are not saying the words aloud, and I rebuke you...you, who should know me best, do not know me at all. It will only be the outsiders who will recognize who I am."

Pretty insulting response, isn't it? And not surprisingly, they react with rage. How dare this whippersnapper judge us? And yet, he is right – he who is the only one who has the right to judge – and he sees what will happen. They will not accept him – they will judge him and find him not what they expected or wanted as a Messiah. They respond with anger and drive him out to the edge of town. They want to shove him over a cliff, but he slips away before they can exact their sentence upon him, these judges in the little synagogue.

Judging is dangerous business, and these people who judged Jesus did not have all the information they needed to make a wise judgment – in fact they didn't even want all the information. They simply wanted to execute someone who made them intensely uncomfortable.

But what if they had gone a different way in that Sabbath conversation? What if they had followed the guidance that Paul offered the early Christians?

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth."

What if, instead of judgment, they had offered love? Might they have understood the truth that Jesus was offering them?

Paul understood that we human beings know only a part of the story, a part of the truth: "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end." Paul knew that judging prematurely, for our own self-aggrandizement, was pronouncing a verdict without all of the facts. We know only in part.

So in the meantime, if we are so flawed in the judging business, what is left to us? Love. Only love.

Are we meant to be in the judging business or the love business? I'd say it's definitely love.

Now it's important that I insert a disclaimer in here. This particular reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is usually used at weddings and at funerals. It is usually framed as a model of what marriages are supposed to be like, all warm and cozy and full of mutual respect, or as a paean to the superb life of the departed, who was the model of love. But Paul wrote this for a different purpose: the Corinthians were in trouble. They were arguing among themselves, most likely because they were busy judging each other as to who was the best follower of Christ. Some of them were doing some very unchristian things, and others were making a stink about it. And Paul needed to sort them out and say "Stop judging! Start behaving like good followers of Christ and start thinking about how we need to stick together!"

It's hard to stick together if you're busy telling your friend that he is off-base about something, or telling your children that if they don't straighten up and fly right they're going to hell.

Paul wasn't talking about romance, or doing a eulogy. He was saying that it is hard to live in this world. We have all sorts of stuff coming at us every day, and we don't have all the information we need about it – we see through the glass darkly – and yet we have to survive and work together. We have to find a way to love each other even when we have differing opinions, even when we are confused, even when we feel isolated. We will not have all the information we wanted in this life. We might be surrounded by people who disagree with us. We may see others reap glory by being boastful or by doing things that gain admiration from the crowds. The only thing that we can do in the face of such confusion, such anxiety, is to love.

It seems a little crazy, doesn't it? Shouldn't we be arguing our case? Shouldn't we be telling others who are incorrect how wrong they are?

In the immortal words of Dr. Phil, how's that been working for you?

Not very well, I would imagine. It rarely does. But what if the path we take is not about winning or judging or correcting...what if the path is simply to look at another and say "you are a child of Christ. I love you."

Can you imagine what that conversation might be like, if we got out of the judging business and got into the loving business?

Amen.