

Luke 13:1-9
7 March 10

Judge not; bear your own fruit. That's the message of what Jesus says today, and it's also the message of this sermon. Judge not; bear your own fruit.

The judge not part is hard. Maybe that's why Jesus kept repeating it. Like in the sermon on the mount in which Jesus says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? ⁵You 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."

Seems specific and clear: judge not. But it's still hard. Most of us compare ourselves to others. We compare our weight, our looks, our relationships, our faith, and so much more. In comparing, we make judgements about our superiority or lack thereof. We judge.

We judge in other ways, too. Human beings have a tendency to blame the victims. Job's friends insisted that his woes were caused by some great sin he had committed. Breath-taking ignorance. If ill fortune befalls someone, we suspect they may have done something to deserve it. Sometimes that's true; smokers do get lung cancer. But so do people who don't smoke. Recently, a prominent televangelist claimed the earthquake in Haiti was the result of a pact their forebears made with the Devil a few centuries ago. I'm not sure anyone's offered an explanation for the earthquake in Chile—or the one in San Francisco in the early 1900s.

To such speculation, Jesus says, Don't judge. Rather mind your own business. "Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? Do you think that those on whom the Tower of Siloam fell were worse offenders than all others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent (that's the mind your own business part), unless you repent, you will also perish just as they did." Judge not. It takes your focus off the one place where you can actually make a difference—yourself. Judge not; that's God's business. And fortunately for us all God is a very different kind of judge than are we.

Instead, bear your own fruit. Again this week, though not so gently this time, Jesus calls us to repent. And the mark of repentance Jesus points to is bearing fruit. There is harshness for those who judge. But there is forbearance and help for those trying to bear good fruit. I understand that fig trees start bearing figs pretty early in their lives. But there is this tree that for three years in a row has been no earthly good. The vineyard owner wants to cut down this worthless tree. But the vine dresser says, "Wait a minute. Maybe it's not getting what it needs to bear figs. How about if I dig around it to loosen up the soil and put some fertilizer on it? Let me do that, and let's see if we don't get some figs next year. If not, well, then maybe the tree really is no good, and we should cut it down." There is forbearance and help for those who are supposed to produce fruit. But this forbearance is not unlimited.

Jesus loves us enough to accept us as we are. And Jesus loves us so much that he will not leave us as we are. Jesus loves us enough to tell the truth about us and to hold before us our God-given vocation to bear good fruit.

Now, here I gotta tell you that I struggle a bit with God's constant call throughout the Old and New Testaments to bear fruit. On the one hand, as Chris Lee says, most people think of themselves as good. And one really good definition of what it means to *be* good is to *do* good. If you're no earthly good to anyone, then maybe you *aren't* all that good. I believe that's true.

But it's also true that there are many things beyond our control. I once interviewed for a mission director's position. When asked how I evaluated mission starts, I said, "For better and for worse, I'm a numbers guy. We invest a lot of money and effort in mission starts, and we should expect results. At the same time, there are a lot of things beyond our control. And sometimes we don't get good results no matter what we do." Maybe Jesus' words about judging others apply to ourselves, too.

So, maybe the best way to go is to continually evaluate what our words and actions and relationships and faith are producing. Are they any earthly good? Are we producing the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control—are we producing them in ourselves and those around us? If not, maybe we need to dig up the soil around us and spread some fertilizer. You know, make sure that we are being fed, so that we can give from our fullness. Make sure that we are being fed with the Word of God and with bread and wine and with worship and praise and prayer and life in the community the bible calls the very body of Christ. In short, if we're not being any earthly good, then clearly something is wrong somewhere, and we can't keep doing the same old thing—it's not working. We've got some changes to make.

And maybe also, in the midst of constant self-evaluation of our fruit bearing, we need to take to heart Jesus's words about not judging and apply them to ourselves. Maybe we just haven't been given a good hand to play. Maybe the soil in which we're planted isn't all that fertile. Maybe even our poor fruit bearing is largely our fault and is the result of the poor choices we've made in the past. A past we cannot change no matter how much we wish we could: a past of which we repent and commend to the great mercy of God who judges very differently from us.

And maybe we also trust that just as God can bring life from death, God can also bring good from evil and can use our feeble efforts to produce rich fruit and bring all kinds of earthly good.