

Sermon Archive 575

Sunday 8 March, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections for Lent 3

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A Lesson: John 8: 1-6

A Reflection: Why do we judge one another?

Stones have been taken up, and are ready to fling. They shall be flung in judgment - because it seems that here we have found something to be judged. When is it **proper** to judge? And when it's not proper, what inclines to judge anyway? What really is going on here as only one party to the act of adultery is accused? And what, in response, does Christ call his Lenten people to cultivate?

-ooOoo-

The first judge. This judge has been appointed to preside over a court room, in which different arguments are heard. There is prosecution, and there is defence - both are important to the process, as is the truth. And in theory it's all about things that really matter, for the preservation of public order and good - the goal is a safe community. And the process itself is constrained by order - it's tiresomely orderly. Its carefulness and lack of pace tends to move it from what we think about when saying "judgmental". For this kind of thing, we tend instead to use the word "judicial". What's going on in front of Jesus, as the people take up their stones is **judicial** to the extent that it's related to a law that the people accept (Deuteronomy 22, Leviticus 20). I wonder whether Jesus isn't too sure, though, that the connection between the law and what's developing in front of him is perhaps a little loose. Does he feel that the courtroom dispassion is insufficiently present as knuckles go white around stones?

The second judge. My mother and father taught me right from wrong. They taught me in ways deemed appropriate for a child. You know the rationale - you've heard it before. Don't bother explaining thermodynamics - just tell the child not to touch the oven. Don't explain toxicology - just whack the child away from the toadstool. There's this kind of behavioural urgency that keeps the play simple. We don't need to know the why. We need preserving from the "that". Many people grow out of the plainness as they learn reasons, as they work out how the world works. But for others; their moral universe retains the shape of the "just don't do it". It's a kind of moral simplicity - could we call it "ethical fundamentalism"?

One of the things that caused Lloyd Geering trouble some decades ago was his stance of the "fall of humankind". Noting that the man and the woman in the garden of Eden were considered to have "fallen" when they attained knowledge on "good and evil", Lloyd wondered whether their development of moral discernment shouldn't instead have been described as a "rise". Not a "fall", but a complicated, costly "rise" - the awakening of an awareness. Well, the widespread discomfort expressed with Lloyd's thinking on this might indicate that some of us anyway feel we need to defend a morality that is simple, maybe black and white. In black and white, did you break the rule? Well, if you did, then we throw our stones. The world is simple, to be navigated simply, with a simple ethic of obedience.

The third judge. The third judge operates out of insecurity. ***I have two kinds of insecurity in mind.*** The first is just a general unhappiness about self - how one is performing in the "race of life". I count my moderate pile of cash. I survey the modest property I rent from my landlord. I consider my job at work - which overwhelmingly ordinary. I feel better about it, though, when I consider those who have even less - fewer coins, shabbier house, no house, worse job, no job. I feel better about myself as I ponder their lack of performance. It's like in the act of judging others, I rise in the estimation of my self.

In his book Status Anxiety, British philosopher Alain de Botton, explores the American dream. The American dream states that everyone can get ahead if they simply believe in themselves and work hard. To the extent that the American dream is right, America should be a place where everyone is empowered, liberated, free to pursue happiness. De Botton notes the great irony that America is a place of huge jealousy, frustration, and judgment of neighbour. The frustration with one's own modest success in America leads to resentment of those who get ahead. It leads to a deep despising of those who fall behind. The dream which should create fraternity and comfort about our status, creates quite the opposite. How good, Lord, then not to be in America! - but here where we honour our tall poppies and don't know what the German word means "schadenfreude".

The second kind of insecurity driving judgment is a more narrowly focussed thing. It's not a general unhappiness with self. It's a specific fear related to what (or who) is being judged. The lady doth protest too much. It has long been noted in rainbow circles that some of our most vocal critics have been those who later have jumped the fence. They judge, often in anger, because something they see connects with them in a confronting way they are not yet able to process. They fear owning it themselves.

Talking about "owning it ourselves", it was noted by some perceptive biblical commentator that the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman who had been

caught *in the very act* of adultery - red handed! How amazing (one might say how inconveniently convenient) that they'd been right there when the act was happening. Is adultery something perhaps a little close to some of the Pharisees? Interesting too, that the Levitical law required that both the woman and the man should be killed - but no man is presented for judgment. Maybe they couldn't identify him - a bit strange, given their claim that they'd been caught in the very act. That must have been a very strange sexual encounter, that one party was completely absent. Strange also how we process our insecurities through judgment in such a selective way.

-ooOoo-

How was that for a first survey of our inclination to judge? More important than the survey, though, is what Jesus does next.

Music for Reflection

A Lesson: John 8: 7-11

A Reflection: Collateral damage and empathy

Just before "what Jesus does next", there's a wee unresolved detail dangling from the previous part of the reading. We're told that the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman to Jesus to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. This was never actually about the woman. She was simply a prop in the trap that they were setting for Jesus. We might call this "collateral damage", the sacrificing of a worthless pawn (which you might say is the penultimate act of judgment. Penultimate? The ultimate act being another human being they will sacrifice in the assuaging of their insecurity - Golgotha, ah Golgotha!) There's another sermon there - but not for now.

For now, Jesus needs to work his way around these stones. He does it with the brilliant call for the one among them who is "without sin" to cast the first stone. Last week we talked about hypocrisy. This week he's raising that spectre again. Be honest about what's going on here - don't pretend that you're someone you're not.

But more than that, Jesus is also appealing to their empathy.

As you have grown in life, as you have (in Geering's framing) become more discerning about good and evil, can you say that you don't understand how easy (maybe natural) it is to stray - to disappoint yourself? Any mature review of life will uncover things we know condemn us. Any mature review of life will show in fact that we live only by grace - made real in human interaction occasionally by those who say "I know, but I forgive".

When someone sins, we **can** judge them. We often do. Could we perhaps, though, in the spirit of Jesus, pause to wonder why they have done what they have done? Could we wonder what it is like to be them - those feet walking in those shoes. There generally will be a reason for the "fall", and understanding (or being willing to understand the conundrum) is perhaps part of what Jesus is opening up for us as a Lenten way to growth. Empathy is activated, and we can let go of our stones.

Josh Johnson, an American comedian, spoke about the recently departed African American mayor of New York City, Eric Adams - and his reintroduction to the New York City Police Department of the "stop and frisk" powers. Given the way that these powers had been shown to be 90% used against people of African or Hispanic descent (which felt a lot like racial profiling), they'd been found to be unconstitutional in 2013, and discontinued - until reinstated by Adams in 2021.

Josh says: "[Eric Adams] tells the story of being a victim of police brutality, at like 14 / 15. He and his friend got caught. I think they had stolen some cheques. And it was when they were trying to cash the stolen cheques, they got caught and basically they got beat[en] up at the police station . . . And so it's just weird to me that he's so adamant about being punitive - as someone who grew up the way that he grew up - it's very odd that he doesn't see himself in any of the youth that he wants to arrest or wants to punish like that."

"How can he not see himself in them?" That's what Josh said. And indeed, it's depressing how often empathy is not able to be activated. Maybe the activation of empathy requires the facilitation of someone as perceptive and skilful as Jesus. At the word of Jesus, one by one, the stone brandishers drop their stones and disperse. Finally it's just Jesus and the woman left. "Woman, has no one condemned you?" "Not one, Sir". "Neither do I condemn you - go and sin no more".

Week by week during Lent, we consider the stones that got presented to Jesus - to get in the way of his bringing his kingdom. This week the stones are judgment - and Jesus' way around those stones is the activation of empathy. How are we going to go with that?

We keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.