

Sermon Text for August 24, 2014

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

II Chronicles 19:4-7, James 4:11-12

“Judge not...”

It was so tempting this week to put aside our Scripture and to address the issues that have crowded themselves into our minds. How can we avoid Ferguson and its race riots which made many of us go back to the days of Rodney King and an activism that is foreign to these parts. It was tempting, but Scripture, James in particular, beckoned.

It was tempting to continue along and address the neighborhood kids which I would love to make the defining issue of my ministry over and against whatever topics de jure would press upon us in this church. But Scripture called out to be recognized.

As we reel from the death of Keri and we all remain stunned at how we can literally one moment be enjoying the company around us at breakfast and then in a twinkling of an eye find ourselves face to face with our Savior who is greeting us with outstretched arms saying behind a welcoming smile, well done good and faithful servant, Keri, well done. But the authority upon which we base our lives, the Bible, demanded to be read, and so we do.

In our Old Testament we find a new king over Judah wanting to bring his people back under the loving fold of our Creator God so he goes on a tour of cities, brings them to God, and then sets up people, leaders, in each of the outer lying cities who would judge on behalf of the Lord. He appoints them, empowers them to make decisions on behalf of the people, to cast judgment, to decide who is right and who is wrong. What is wise and what is foolish.

Notice the order in which Jehosaphat does this is crucial. He first turns the nation back to the Lord, away from idolatry. Then he calls the people who will be judging for him, that they are going to be judging on behalf of the Lord. They had to have the fear of the Lord as part of their make-up. The foundational backing of all that they did had to be found in their Creator God.

So God called them to cast judgment on people. But we have been raised culturally and you see plastered all over facebook the words “do not judge.” We feel as if this is a direct command from God himself that we should never have strong feelings or thoughts about people, about issues. The term judge not has been used to keep people from speaking up when they see an injustice or if they want to speak up about a topic that is important to them.

But every day we have to make decisions, and we have make judgment calls every single moment of our lives. I remember when I was a kid and got into trouble, a few times, twice my parents didn't allow me to spend any time over the summer with my best friend. It happened

over a span of eight years, once when I was in Italy and once when I was in Ventnor. They had decided that my friends were a bad influence so the judgment was cast. It never entered their mind that maybe I was the bad influence. But as parents we make decisions, as singles, as adults as members of the church, no matter who you are you make judgment calls that affect you and affect those around you.

Before this last session meeting on this past Wednesday, we heard from this Scripture that each elder had, yes, been chosen by you, but more importantly had been chosen by God to a specific calling which is one of leadership and one of embracing the responsibility casting judgment on issues that affect the life of the church.

There has been no single issue that has affected the life of this church and no single issue that you as a body have weighed in on more than how are we to deal with those dozen or more neighborhood youth who see our church as a place to hang out.

Each session member, for the first time since I've been here, was comfortable enough to say what they felt, passionately, with emotion, not concerned about whether people agreed with them or not, they represented you well. For an hour and a half the conversation raged. It wasn't an argument, it was an honest attempt to understand the will of God in this particular case and for this particular issue. Each session member loves each one of those kids, without a doubt, but how do we reach out while at the same time not enabling past mistakes that these kids have made?

We had to make a judgment call and we did and a policy was crafted which allows for real ministry to take place while at the same time setting up parameters that are healthy for everyone. Session made a judgment, and it was of the Lord.

So why do we assume that we ought not to judge? Culture tells us so, Jesus uses the phrase "Do not judge" in Matthew 7 when he goes on to speak about the splinter in our neighbor's eye which we try to take out when we have a log in our eye. "Do not judge, or else you are going to come under the same judgment."

What Scripture does is make a distinction between making a decision based on a judgment of a situation or of people and a judgment against a person which we might call slander, character assassination, or another word that we are familiar with which is gossip.

So go back with me to James 3 especially the first verses where it focuses on what part of our body and speaks about the danger of what? That's right, the tongue. We have already spoken about a type of culture of silence that we recognize is a part of Lancaster County. But within this culture of silence a culture of gossip and character assassination and slander is able to

find very fertile ground. Let's look at James and see how he wants us to have a culture of love thy neighbor.

We only have two verses to look at here so let's begin by asking the question of who is James addressing? We've already answered that question in the past but here it becomes clear. Verse 1 Do not speak evil against one another brothers. You will call a brother or a sister someone who is in your family and so in this case someone who is in your church family. So, James is saying, members of First Presbyterian don't speak evil about each other. Paschal once said: "I lay it as a fact, that if all men knew what others say of them, there would not be four friends in the world."

I am convinced that gossip, or slander, or character assassination is the most damaging problem in the church. I know some of you are new to this church and so don't know your brothers and sisters well enough to gossip about them, but that is a reality that we face as a church. James goes on and states that whoever speaks evil of another plays the role of God by disobeying His commandment and so placing himself above God's authority. When we sin by speaking about someone in a not so nice way, we put ourselves in the place of God.

So what is gossip? I want to answer that question because there are many conversations that begin with: I don't want to gossip but ... and then a person gets absolutely crucified. James really helps us here. The term speak evil is mentioned 3 times here and in the Greek it is katalalein and it means to speak harshly or to slander someone when they are not present.

Think about that. The next conversation that you have with someone and a person comes up in the conversation who is not present, unless you had better not speak harshly about them. Too many times we find ourselves involved in our favorite past time which is to speak harshly against someone that is not present. James says how can we do that to our own family? Now Ephesians 4:15 tells us to speak truth in love and sometimes we use this as an opportunity to speak harshly about someone, but the point is that you speak it to the person who needs to hear it in their presence.

James is not alone in addressing this. Leviticus 19:16 we have a prohibition against slander, even if it is true. That is something that I hear a lot of people say as they are trashing on the reputation: but it's the truth. Our perception of the truth does not allow us to think that God's law does not apply to us or that somehow we are above the law.

In Romans 1:30 Paul underscores the severity of this sin of katalalein as he includes it in the list of those sins that are egregious along with adultery, fornication, greed. He goes on to say that those who do such things, such as gossip, deserve to die. Now some may think that if I'm

talking about someone and stop when the pastor comes in the room, then I'm good. No, gossip is a form of judgment that places ourselves above other people.

One of my least favorite types of messages from Scripture is the one that addresses what some call the lowest common denominator. Gossip is not a topic that addresses the war in Palestine, the war in Ukraine. You can't stretch it far enough to handle Ferguson which needs to be addressed in the light of Scripture. Today's Scripture, though, simply does not address it. But it does address a topic which this church has to come to terms with. It does address a cancer that we have as a church that needs to be taken out.

James is writing to us. We have to stop criticizing those who run a program or a fundraiser, we have to stop talking negatively about people within this church who maybe are going through a time in their life when they are confused or struggling in one way or another. God is calling us to an exciting ministry here at FPC and we have to be able to live together as a family without hurting each other with our words. May God bless us as we look to do that. Amen.