

**The Facts of Life**  
**Matthew 7:1-14**  
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**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
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I remember most vividly Blair, the blond big-haired drama queen and Jo, the bold, brash, pony-tailed brunette, and of course Mrs. Garrett, her red hair tight in a bun, always adorned with an apron. For thirty glorious minutes each week I escaped into their world at Eastland Boarding school, where Blair and Jo were students and Mrs. Garrett was den mother in their dorm and learned some of the facts of life. One of the longest running sitcoms of the eighties, *The Facts of Life* revealed the triumphs and trials of high school girls. An elementary school girl at the time, this show was my only window into the tumultuous teenage years, and I watched with great interest. I laughed with the girls and cried with them too. I don't remember any specific lessons gleaned from my watching, except a better understanding that in life there are lots of ups and downs—people hurt others; people forgive. People say things they don't mean; people apologize. People are left out; people welcome. These are the facts of life.

In today's scripture, the third and final chapter of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers his listeners and us wisdom about how to respond faithfully as we deal with the facts of life. He begins with a doozy: Do not judge. Whoa. Three words in, and this wisdom seems impossible to heed. Do not judge? To judge...to discern... to make decisions... is part of our humanness. Just last week, when we learned Jesus' instruction to pray the Lord's prayer, we first heard his judgment: "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that

they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them....” (Matthew 6: 7, 8a). Jesus goes on, after teaching the Lord’s prayer, to judge lives focused on material goods: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure, there your heart will be also (6:19-20a,21).

Jesus’ words confirm what we know—judgment is a fact of life. What is up to us is the *way* we judge. The Sermon on the Plain, Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, says this: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged, do not condemn, and you will not be condemned” (6:37). The Greek verb translated in the scripture as judge is specifically regarding condemnation to Hell—not just judgment on an action but judgment on one’s salvation. With his command, Jesus is prohibiting his listeners from condemning other people’s lives. The listeners then and us this morning are prohibited from declaring another to be unworthy of God’s mercy and from treating someone unjustly. Ordained Presbyterian Pastor and author Frederick Buechner offers a beautiful image of how justice and mercy go together: “Justice is the pitch of the roof and the structure of the walls. Mercy is the patter of rain on the roof and the life sheltered by the walls. Justice is the grammar of things. Mercy is the poetry of things” (Buechner 2016). There is no need for a roof if there is no rain; one makes the other necessary. Justice and mercy go together.

Jesus challenges us with the command to judge with compassion and thoughtfully discern what is right. As Christians, this is a difficult fact of life we must accept and live out. Our bringing about God’s kingdom here on earth; a community grounded in justice, compassion, faith, love, and hope, depends on it. And sometimes, even people’s lives depend on it.

On Wednesday I volunteered at Willard's library, to help the librarian check in and check out books while she taught the class. As I scanned book after book into the computer, I also listened to Ms. Skogland tell the class about the Black Lives Matter Movement, appropriate because it was Black Lives Matter week at school. She began by asking the kids if they had heard of Trayvon Martin. They immediately said yes, and that yesterday—February 5th—had been his birthday. He would have turned 24. But he did not; in part because of one man's judgment of condemnation of him. A judgment based on what the man saw, while driving, from inside his truck. On a dark night, through the windshield wipers and falling raindrops, what George Zimmerman saw was a black teenage boy wearing a black hoodie, hood up, with one hand in his pocket, walking along a path in his neighborhood. Yet, this is what Mr. Zimmerman told the police when he called them from his truck:

"Hey, we've had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there's a real suspicious guy," he told the police operator. "This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something. It's raining, and he's just walking around looking about" (Robles 2012). With this judgment formed, that Trayvon was suspicious, up to no good and perhaps on drugs, Zimmerman continued to follow the young man. He and Trayvon ended up getting into a fight, which ended with Zimmerman shooting him. The details of the altercation will never be fully known, but what is known, by 911 call and police call recordings, is that initially Mr. Zimmerman judged Trayvon very quickly, and it was a judgment of condemnation.

This is an extreme example, yes, but Mr. Zimmerman's assumptions about Trayvon are not. Our media, our society, even our neighbors encourage and engage in superficial assumptions all the time, based on race, class, age, sex,

residence, education, accent, appearance, family...the list is endless. In this final part of Jesus' inaugural address, he instructs us to push against the media and society and, if necessary, even our neighbors, and judge with care, with justice and compassion, to offer mercy rather than condemnation and to concern ourselves with our own actions rather than others'. It is amazing how easy it is to notice the small faults in others, and ignore our own. Jesus calls us out on this reality, naming us hypocrites, and encouraging us to be aware of and work on ourselves so that we can clearly and fairly judge others.

This is very hard work, friends. But it is work that we do not do alone.

We do this work with God; we do this work with prayer; we do this work with trust, trust in our Creator for steadfast love, presence and protection. "Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7), Jesus proclaims to his followers. These things *will* happen. And yet, we know that prayers for healing go unheeded, the prayers for assistance result in no help; prayers for opportunities lead to endless frustration. How can this proclamation be true?

If we read it as a Jewish person. In Judaism, the expressions of Ask, Seek and Knock are not three different actions. They are three different expressions of one sacred action: prayer. Seek and knock are used here to broaden the description of prayer from merely a transaction in which we ask something from God to a two-sided interaction. In our seeking and knocking, and waiting, *God* will act; it is not up to us to answer the prayer. God is the active one in the relationship. We are dependent on God: another fact of life.

Dependent on God, and on each other. The myth that we live independent lives is false. Any time a machine fails me I am reminded of this! Lately, I have also been reminded of it more often when I eat. In her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*, author Tish Harrison Warren offers an answer to the question “How do we embrace the sacred in the ordinary and the ordinary in the sacred?” By reflecting on the sacred and ordinary parts of one day of her life, beginning with waking up and brushing her teeth to making peanut butter sandwiches and concluding with bedtime, she reflects on the sacredness found in every day actions, when one looks for it with intention.

I recently read the chapter: *Eating leftovers: word, sacrament, and overlooked nourishment*. In it, Warren opens with a story of her eating leftover taco soup—one of millions forgettable meals that brings her nourishment; that keeps her alive, a meal including ingredients from all over the world, harvested, washed and canned by people she’ll never meet. She and her husband may have put the ingredients together for the meal, but dozens of people had a hand in making that taco soup.

In little ways and big ways, we are dependent on others for our lives. We do not live alone on an island but with other people.

This has always been true, and for almost as long, people have been guided in their living by the Golden Rule, which is told by Jesus in today’s passage: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets (Matthew 7:12)”. This rule was a known moral ideal long before Jesus’ time. A universal moral and ethical expectation, the Golden rule is listed in Hammurabi’s code, crafted in 1754 BCE, just as it was advice given by the unforgettable New York Yankees catcher

Yogi Berra, who put it simply: "Don't do nothin' you wouldn't want done to ya."

The piece that Hammurabi and Yogi were missing was "for this is the law and the prophets." Jesus says: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; *for this is the law and the prophets*" (Matthew 7:12). This piece of the rule grounds it in holy history back to Abraham and makes it a more difficult rule to follow. The fact of Christian life is that we are not our own; we are God's. Therefore, it is not enough to treat people as you alone would like to be treated, you must treat people as *God* has instructed us to treat them, with justice and mercy and love—even when you don't feel like it.

This is a more difficult way to live, which is why Jesus says: "For the gate is narrow and the road is hard and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:14). But it is a gate worth searching for, because it is the one that leads to life.

And a life we've been given instructions on how to live. Jesus gave us the facts of life we need in order to go through the narrow gate and journey with God on the harder road, together walking towards life.

Friends, the next step for us is to get moving.

As the Facts of Life Theme song goes:

*"There's a time you've got to go and show  
You're growin', now you know about the facts of life."*

Our time is now. We are growin' in our faith and we know the facts of life. Let us now live them out in a world desperate to learn them, too. Amen.

## Works Cited

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