

## Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

1 Samuel 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23

Ps 102

1 Corinthians 15:45-49

Luke 6:27-38

Shortly after his election, Pope Francis famously asked the rhetorical question, “who am I to judge?” during an interview aboard a papal flight, and the global media went abuzz. He was discussing the hypothetical case of a priest who might be wrestling with same-sex attraction, but who was doing his best to be faithful to his promise of celibacy. Of course, the nuanced context of the quote was largely lost in the reportage. All most people saw—or at least, all many wanted to see—was that, in discussing homosexuality, the pope said, “Who am I to judge?” This quote was then used by many as a proverbial battering-ram against anyone who may have harboured reservations about the morality of homosexual behaviour or same-sex marriage.

There’s a certain irony in all this: namely, people quoting phrase “who am I to judge?” as a means of judging and condemning those who questioned the popular view on homosexuality. Some observers have spoken of this phenomenon as a curious combination of *broadmindedness* and *bigotry*. In other words, broadmindedness towards those who we are ideologically predisposed to embrace, yet bigotry towards anyone who would dare question such an arrangement.

Examples of this sort of thing abound. I recall reading an article on matters archaeological in a science magazine, in which the author was discussing the walls of human skulls with which the Aztecs embellished their capital city.

Speaking of the Aztecs, the author was as broadminded as could be, perhaps channelling a somewhat superficial reading of “who am I to judge?” Whilst not explicitly approving human sacrifice, she went to great lengths to not judge the culture that had produced it in such startling numbers. Avoiding any hint of condemnation in their direction, she wrote:

*“It’s hard for me to imagine that people ‘wanted’ to be sacrificed, but that’s my own biases and cultural conditioning talking.”*

I would think it’s safe to presume that no-one in any culture at any time would ‘want’ to be sacrificed. However, after bending over backwards to not judge the Aztecs for their human sacrifice, in the very next sentence her broadmindedness gives way to a stinging condemnation of the Spanish colonists whose arrival served to eventually stop it:

*“How I see the world, filtered through centuries of colonial oppression and destruction, is irrelevant to understanding how they (the Aztecs) saw the world.”*

Notice how she uses words such as *oppress* and *destroy*, rather than a more “broadminded” reading of the Spanish impact on the Aztec culture. In other words, an author who could understand—albeit with some difficulty—the sacrificial tendencies of the Aztec culture, made no such effort to understand the Spanish colonists whose arrival eventually brought an end to the practice of human sacrifice in the area.

Now, it’s not my intention to get bogged down in the history wars or the debates over homosexuality. I’m simply noting that the injunction to not judge—in our day and age—is often applied very selectively – namely towards those with whom we are inclined to be sympathetic, and most certainly not those with whom we ideologically disagree. And this applies to us wherever we might find ourselves on the ideological spectrum.

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Now, at this point I should emphasise that Jesus’ injunction to not judge lest we be judged ourselves does not mean we can or should withhold all forms of judgement. We make necessary judgements all the time. When you sat down at your pew, you subconsciously judged that it would support your weight. When you take each step, you subconsciously judge that the ground will not collapse beneath you. When you take a bite of your next meal, you will be judging it safe for you to eat. We do this countless times a day.

Even when it comes to moral matters, Jesus himself was not shy about condemning the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, or the lukewarmness of many of his own followers. Genuine love sometimes requires us to say challenging words, and Jesus did this with great frequency.

How then are we to take his injunction that we not judge lest we be judged ourselves? Well, the Catholic tradition has long made a distinction between judging particular actions and judging the soul or intentions of those who do them. “Love the sinner; hate the sin,” as the saying goes.

No human being has the capacity to judge the ultimate standing of another person before God. People can do some objectively horrendous things based on fear, hurt, or misinformation. Recall the words of Jesus when he acknowledged that his executioners “know not what they do.”

However, this doesn’t change the horrendousness of his execution. Though God alone is competent to judge the heart, we can and must judge whether objective behaviour is bad or good, right or wrong. Sometimes it is even our duty to charitably tell people that it is wrong. Believe it or not, admonishing sinners is actually one of the great spiritual works of mercy, though of course one that requires great prudence.

For example, stealing is objectively wrong. But that does not mean that a particular thief is automatically alienated from God and bound for hell. And it does not mean that I am necessarily better than the person who has stolen with regularity. Jesus said “from those to whom much has been given, much will be expected”. Maybe the thief has done more good with what they’ve been handed in life than I have. That’s not for me to figure out – that’s up to God. My responsibility is to care enough about them to offer them the truth about stealing when appropriate, and perhaps help them get the support they need to live according to that truth.

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And here’s where the question of “judge not” ties in with Jesus’ remarkable command regarding the love of enemies.

Many of you would have heard the maxim, “charity begins at home.” Well, the examples of selective broadmindedness that I began with essentially reverse this and say that “charity begins with the stranger.” And the *stranger* the stranger, the better. For native Aztecs who offered beating human hearts to their hungry gods, the author I quoted offers understanding. For the Spanish colonists—who admittedly were a mixed-blessing, but did bring Christianity with them as well—there is only condemnation.

G. K. Chesterton spoke to this tendency that we all have in the amusing conclusion of his poem, “The World State”:

*This compromise has long been known,  
This scheme of partial pardons,  
In ethical societies  
And small suburban gardens  
The villas and the chapels where  
I learned with little labour  
The way to love my fellow-man  
And hate my next-door neighbour.*

The requirement to love our enemies is easier when it is done at a distance. We can be generous with strangers we never have to actually meet, but people we see every day who rub us the wrong way are a different story. As I often say, we there’s not much point in saying we love humanity if we can’t stand the person in the room next door. Now, maybe we don’t think of the person in the room next door as an enemy per se, so perhaps we could paraphrase Jesus and say: “love those who tick you off from time to time.”

Our modern tendency to be selectively broadminded allows us to nurse hatreds and vendettas behind a pleasant-looking screen of universal charity. What is more, it allows us to nurse hatreds against those to whom we often owe a debt of gratitude and have a special obligation of forbearance.

This is why charity has to begin at home, because that's where it becomes real. That's where it actually costs us something. And when we can truly love those who are in our face every day and tick us off from time to time, then maybe we *can* say that we love humanity and it will be more than an empty platitude.

So we aren't to be naïve about the reality of evil and our need to name it for what it is, but we also can't blind ourselves to the fact that the line dividing good from evil runs right down every human heart, including our own. Perhaps one reason why Jesus exhorts us not to judge hearts is that, when we do, we are judging our own in the process.

Perhaps the best way of approaching this delicate balance is in the maxim often attributed to Pope Saint John XXIII: "In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity."