

## THE DANGER OF POINTING FINGERS

**John 12:1-12**

One of the things that they teach you, when you go into preaching is to be careful about giving advice to people. It's really a fundamental tenant of pastoral care. It's always dangerous to give people advice. None of us have to live the life that another person lives. We don't have to deal with the people in their lives. We don't have to deal with the emotions they experience, and while they may be able to describe those emotions to us, it's not the same because we don't *feel* those emotions. In a situation like that, giving advice is problematic at best.

So, of course, I've advised people many times. I thought my advice was so magical it would fix the situation. Of course, I was wrong. My advice didn't make their lives any better.

I'll give you one example. One person that I remember very well whom I'm going to refer to as Stacy. That isn't her real name. Stacy has no connection to this church whatsoever. There's no reason any of you should know who Stacy is. She was a young woman in her twenties. She had been married for three years, and had a son who was about two and a half years old when I first met her. Over time Stacy and I became friends, and she learned I was a preacher, and she told me her story. In fact, she asked if she could talk to me, and, of course, I said yes. She was married to a young man who was controlling and both emotionally and verbally abusive to her.

As I listened to her story, I chimed in and I told her that she needed to take care of herself and her child, and she wasn't responsible for how her husband felt. She exploded and screamed at me, "I am responsible!" She then went on a tirade and gave me an earful.

I wish I could say that was the only incidence in my career of me giving advice to someone, but it isn't. I often think I know what's best for others. It's funny how they don't think that, but I often think that I do. The truth is, I don't.

Now, maybe you might say that in Stacy's instance I was correct- that my advice was pretty good, and she should have listened to me. Maybe you think that she should have followed my advice. You might especially feel justified in thinking that way, if you knew that shortly thereafter, she did leave her husband. It turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to her. However, it needed to be her choice and not mine.

The truth is, I acted incorrectly when I did that. You see, there are some things about that incident that I haven't told you yet. For example, I never met her ex-husband. Truthfully, I saw him once from a distance and that was by happenstance. I judged him. I decided what he was thinking, what he was feeling, and what his general behavior was like based on a third-party description. I did so without having met him. I did so without knowing anything about his family. I didn't know how he was raised or what he felt about anything that was happening. I never met him, and I never talked to him. Yet, I felt justified in judging him.

Furthermore, I judged her. I judged her for staying with him, even though I didn't know what it was like to live with him. I didn't know how she felt; I only knew how she told me she felt. It needs to be pointed out that she didn't ask me for my advice. She just asked if she could talk to me and share what her situation was. She didn't ask me to advise her- to take care of her.

The only comfort I take from that incident was to know that I am not alone. There is something endemic to the nature of the human being that causes us to judge one another. I guess it's a part of our human nature. Sometimes, judging others is a way to pass the buck when we have sinned. A good example of this is the story of the fall in the book of Genesis. When God confronts Adam and Eve after having eaten from the tree, Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. They point fingers at others in an attempt to shift the judgment elsewhere.

I suppose that might be one motive for the actions of Judas Iscariot in this story. When the curtain rises on this tale, Jesus and his Disciples have traveled to the house of Lazarus in the city of Bethany. Lazarus hosts a dinner party for them, and while they are eating Mary approaches with a pound of expensive oil of nard, anoints Jesus' feet with that oil, and proceeds to wipe off his feet with her hair.

Now, I need to tell you some things in order to place this story in context. First, let's talk about the dinner. When I was boy, it was a big deal when we had a guest for dinner. When it was just our family eating supper, we ate at a big, round table in our kitchen. When we had company, the dinner was different. My mother would dress the dining room table in a fancy table cloth. She would lay out the fancy dishes and the fancy silverware just so, and it looked perfect. We ate dinner in the dining room, which was strange to me because I wasn't even allowed to go in that room most of the time. I had to stay out of it.

In the Ancient Near East, things were very similar. The context of this story makes it clear that this is a formal dinner party. Families ate together. However, when they had company things were more formal. In fact, it was common for friends and colleagues, groups of men for friends and colleagues on things like religious holidays and feast days and public events.

There were, however, some differences from what we do. In our society, everyone at the dinner is treated like an equal- with the exception that sometimes the children eat at a kid's table. They eat at a separate table, but usually that's a function of not having enough room, it's not that the kids are somehow "less than". At least, that's what we tell the kids. In the ancient world, every aspect of the meal was designed to communicate a person's social status. Details such as who sat next to whom, at which table, and what food was served, were very big deals. You never had to question what the host of the party felt about you, because you knew by which table you were sitting at and what you were eating. At these meals, children were not even allowed to make an appearance and women were only allowed to serve the meal- they were never allowed to join the party.

This text makes clear that Jesus is considered an honored guest because he is sitting at the table of the host and is being served by the sister of the host, Martha. Mary, however, -in the context of that culture- acts scandalously. She comes in with an expensive oil of nard and anoints his feet, and basically makes a spectacle of herself. Judas Iscariot rebukes her.

Now, I want to be clear. I do not approve of the way that Mary is presented in this passage. The portrayal of her is sexist. I know that. The cultural norms of that day did violence to women. All I want to say is that the response of Judas Iscariot- sexist and judgmental though it is- was not unusual for a man in that culture. His reaction is typical for the norms of that society. He judges her, first of all, because she is not supposed to be in that all-male party- except to serve the food- but secondly, because she is wasting this expensive perfume- from his point of view.

I can understand the impulse to say, "That perfume could have been sold." But as I said before, it's always problematic to judge others. The scripture takes pains to point out that Judas Iscariot is no position to judge, letting us know that he was stealing from the strongbox. By the way, strongbox is a better translation of that word than common purse. Furthermore, he doesn't know why she is doing what she is doing. He has no clue. He doesn't know what she is thinking or feeling in that moment as she's pouring that oil and wiping it on Jesus' feet. He doesn't know what she hoped to achieve. He can't read her mind. For all of those reasons, he is no position to judge her. Not to mention the fact that he is stealing out of the strongbox!

Even if Judas was right, even if she did act inappropriately by the standards of the day, he's no position to judge her. He himself is a sinner. Thank goodness Jesus is there to set him straight. Jesus tells him to leave her alone. She did the only thing she could for me. It was the only thing she had the power to do in that society. There is some question about the translation of this passage. In some manuscripts it reads as, "... she intended to keep it for the day of my burial." In others, "She has kept it for the day of my burial," He goes on to say, "The poor you always have with you, but you will not always have me."

The passage hits home for me, because one of the things it teaches me is that it's always problematic for us to point fingers. The bible says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Only Christ is in a condition or position to condemn. He is the only one who knows the hearts of another. He is the only one of us without sin. Only he is in position to judge others. He's the only one!

There's good news! The good news is that the one who judges us, because he's the one who died to save us. The same person who is in a position to judge us, doesn't do it. Instead, he saves us! He is pointing his fingers at us; but not in the same sense that Judas is pointing a finger at Mary. He's pointing fingers at us not to condemn us- but to choose us. It's like Uncle Sam saying, "I want you." That's what Jesus is doing. Because of him we have eternal life, not eternal judgement. We have eternal life not as judged sinners, but as beloved friends.

