

Matthew 7:1-14, 24-29

In the Korean show "Extraordinary Attorney Woo," the protagonist is a genius, a savant about law and about whales and dolphins. But she is on the autism spectrum, and her interactions with other people are very literal and unskillful. When she goes off on a long discourse about whales during a meeting, a colleague advises her not to talk about whales at the office. But then at lunchtime, another colleague, who's kind of sweet on her, suggests that it's okay to talk about whales at lunch. She repeats, "No whale talk at the office, but whale talk at lunch," and you can tell it's getting really complicated for her, but she's going to try.

In one episode, another attorney is getting emotionally involved with a case, and their supervisor tells Attorney Woo to team up with the emotional attorney and "whoa, whoa" her. He means that she should redirect her colleague when she gets too passionate, but of course Attorney Woo is very literal, so at a certain point she says to her colleague, "Whoa, whoa. Whoa, whoa," all the time making the exact gesture her boss had made to her. It is only because her colleague is a fundamentally sweet-natured person that this can work out.

I thought about this scene when I read today's reading. Matthew continues with the Sermon on the Mount today, and it's a little unnerving, hearing all these pithy texts sort of run together. Usually we separate each saying out, like a precious gem, turning it over and considering it all on its own. I mean, there's a lot here. Judge not, don't be a hypocrite, don't waste what's precious . . . and that's just the beginning. When you do hear or read all of these one after the other, like a string of pearls, it's interesting to ask what the cumulative effect is. And I think as a body these sayings are telling us, "Whoa, whoa." Have a light touch, take it easy and gentle.

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" reminds us to back off and not get too high and mighty about other people's shortcomings. I don't think Jesus is implying a kind of tit for tat, as if God will give you a dose of your own medicine. I think it's more about the world we create for ourselves. If we give judgmentalness a prominent role in our lives, we'll certainly see very clearly how other people are falling short, but we'll also move about in a mental space of perfectionism and lack of grace. If we attend to the stuff that's really in our sphere of influence, like what's in my own eye and not in other people's eyes, we're likely to have a more constructive effect as well as seeing more clearly.

At the same time, Jesus does expect us to *use* judgment. Don't give what is holy to dogs," because "what is holy" is probably the meat left from a sacrifice, which the dogs would love to have but is important for *you* and your family to have. Don't throw pearls before swine, because swine don't even care about pearls the way dogs care about meat, but they'll still maul you and the pearls. So Jesus implies that although we should not be judgmental, we *should* exercise self-care, and not put ourselves out there to be abused or taken for granted by anybody who doesn't value us. He's saying, "Whoa, whoa, on the extremes of the spectrum between high-and-mighty and self-abasing."

All of this Sermon on the Mount is about the attitude to take, or the condition to get into, for a life of discipleship. "Ask and it will be given you, . . . for everyone who asks, receives" is serious advice about spiritual practice. Obviously God is not a vending machine; that's a trivializing but common misreading of the saying. But in the context of these teachings about the life of discipleship, the instructions to ask and be confident of receiving seems to me to be about being transparent with God and persistently honest in one's interactions with God. Ask,

because it's important to you; keep asking, keep bringing it before God, so that you will come to a place of wisdom and insight about your concern. Not bringing your concern to God doesn't make it go away; it just cuts you off from holding it in God's light. This is a spiritual practice, and a gentle one: keep bringing your needs into your conversation with God.

At this point Jesus reminds his listeners that none of this is new. There's a story about the rabbis Hillel and Shammai, who were contemporaries of Jesus. Hillel was apparently very even-tempered, while Shammai was more brusque. Some hilarious prankster, knowing how to push rabbis' buttons, went to Shammai's house and said, "Please, Teacher, I want to learn. Please teach me Torah" [which so far is every rabbi's DREAM, to be asked to teach Torah] "while standing on one foot." Shammai was outraged and slammed the door on the guy. So then he went to Hillel's house and made the same request, but Hillel simply said, "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you. That is the whole law and the prophets; the rest is commentary. Now go and study." Jesus says the same thing: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."

And then he reminds his listeners why all of this is important: because this world is hard on disciples, and you need to have a source of strength. The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life. It's hard not to be judgmental. It's hard to make discernments, and to live gently and generously with other people. Robert Williamson, a Presbyterian minister and scholar who teaches at Hendrix College in Little Rock, founded Mercy Community Church of Little Rock, a multidenominational worshiping community whose members are mostly homeless or housing unstable. He says,

We founded Mercy on the liberation principle that God is more active at the margins of society than at its center. As such, we created a community that was not a

ministry *to* those living on the streets but a ministry *with* and *among* them as friends and neighbors—as brothers and sisters in Christ. Believing in the inherent dignity and worth of all people, Mercy provides a place of hospitality and welcome for those who may not find welcome elsewhere.

Right after the pandemic, Mercy Church came apart, and it is no more. But I heard Williamson reflecting on his experience there, because it was a place where the first rule was, You get to be exactly who you are, no judgments. (That should sound familiar.) He said people living on the streets often have very complicated back stories, emotionally, and it was important to create a community in which you didn't have to anticipate people's reactions to you but could count on being welcome no matter what. He said that presented challenges, like when people were disruptive or antagonistic, but overall, he says, "It is transformative to love people just the way they are. I don't know how you can scale it past ten people or so, but people recognize it and start to respond, and I started to be able to let go of some of my own self-judgment. Being yourself helps you let go of the logs in your own eye."

Mercy Church fell apart, because the gate is narrow and the road is hard. Discipleship is hard in this broken world. But I've never heard him say that it wasn't worth it; the transformative grace of the kingdom is still real and alive to him. It was the experience of Mercy Church that lasts, built on the rock of Jesus' teaching. Even if that congregation is no more, the reverberations of it continue, and make a difference.

The more I think about it, the more I think Jesus is like the senior lawyer telling his autistic subordinate to help her colleague remain calm. The senior lawyer in "Extraordinary Attorney Woo" knows the law, of course. But he also knows human beings. He knows that if he indicates a combination of gentleness and rigor, Attorney Woo will transmit that in her own

way and the colleague will receive it in her own way, and a larger wisdom will be at play. Jesus is telling us all that in this world discipleship is *hard*. But being both generous and discerning, his disciples can find their ways to abundant life.

God of wisdom and groundedness, you have encouraged us to live our lives grounded in faith, patience, and love. Help us to love others without judgement, but with a solid foundation of acceptance, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen