

# Proud to Be Judgment-Free

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The Unitarian Universalist Society in Stamford

November 13, 2005

Message: You can feel proud to be judgment-free!

I enjoy receiving mail or email about my sermons. Some people even write me before I preach them, giving me information, or questions to consider.

For instance, I received this email from one of our members recently. She writes,

Hi Ron: In setting up my schedule, I was looking at next Sunday's topic and wondering if people believe that being "judgment free" means letting all things pass, even when they're a problem.

I have difficulty with some peoples' idea that we make NO judgments. That is so dangerous I don't even know where to begin in countering it.

The concept of “judgment free” is going to need a lot of explanation. I'll be looking forward to how you handle this one. Too many people think it means exercising no judgment and taking no action. [Unquote].

That email reminds me of a certain episode of the newspaper comic strip *Kudzu*. As memory serves, two small-town church baseball teams are on the diamond. A batter steps to the plate. The pitcher hurls. “Strike one!” Another pitch. “Strike two!” Then comes, “Strike three! ... Strike four! Strike five!” On the sideline, one character leans over to the other and says, “I hate playing the Unitarians!”

We Unitarian Universalists do have a reputation for being very forgiving. Some might say too much so.

The title of this morning's sermon, “Proud to Be Judgment-Free” is taken from a phrase Board Member Jonathan Reiss put on our sign on Forest Street. Shortly after he put that phrase on the sign, some anonymous person came by and pasted a sign of his or her own over it. I don't know where that pasted-on sign is now, nor do I remember exactly how it's author worded his or

her objection to what I'd taken to be a fairly innocuous phrase. But, I was struck that someone, presumably with no connection to the congregation, would take the time to read our sign, go home, or Kinko's, or wherever, desktop publish a sign, and paste it on ours.

Was it a religious Fundamentalist, of whatever denomination, offended at our accepting attitude toward gays and lesbians? our advocacy of drug policy reform? our support of sex education?

Was it someone who'd been injured in some way and who finds not judging the person who'd hurt them unthinkable?

Was it someone dismayed at an apparent erosion of societal values?

We can only speculate.

If the writer of that anonymous sign was a Christian Fundamentalist, I think he or she might be shocked to discover that one of the strongest advocates of living judgment-free was a liberal Rabbi named Yeshua, otherwise known as Jesus.

In our traditional reading this morning, we heard his words on the subject from his most important "sermon" or compilation of sayings. The version from our reading is taken from the

Gospel According to St. Luke, where it's often called "The Sermon on the Plain." Matthew's version is the better-known "Sermon on the Mount."

You might want to follow along in your order of service as I read these brief but powerful words once again. In Luke's telling, Jesus says,

*Be not judges of others, and you will not be judged: do not give punishment to others, and you will not get punishment yourselves: make others free, and you will be made free: Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, crushed down, full and running over, they will give to you. For in the same measure as you give, it will be given to you again.*

What is Jesus talking about here? Let's keep in mind, first of all, that *if* we find these words true it must not be because who is credited with having said them. It must be because they have the power to resonate with something deep within us and inspire us to better, happier living.

Do these words, on their own, make sense? If we don't judge others, will we not be judged? If we free, will we be freed? If we give, will we be given to?

Perhaps we can begin to grasp such concepts by observing them in action in a contemporary setting.

The reality TV trend has largely passed me by. For instance, I'd never seen a show called *Trading Spouses* before this week.

But my friend Ed called ReBecca and me and *insisted* we had to watch this week's episode, the conclusion of a two-parter. The idea of the show is that two families exchange two of their spouses for a week, who go to live with the other family. In the case of the episode in question, the two families, who were trading their mothers for a week, were the Perrins and the D'Amico-Flishers.

The show's website introduces the families like this:

Marguerite Perrin ... is admittedly the queen of [her Louisiana] family, while her husband, Barry, is the laid back handyman who does whatever his wife asks of him. The Perrin parents have two children, Ashley and Brooke, along with Ashley's daughter Abigail. Ashley is spends her days as a proud dance teacher at a local dance studio owned by Marguerite and Ashley.

Marguerite also says that she can hear God and is in constant communication with him. The Perrin family are all strong believers of the Christian faith, following in the footsteps of their mother.

Boxborough, Pennsylvania is the home of the D'Amico-Flisher family, a very spiritual family who live a non-traditional lifestyle. Between Jeanne and Chris, they have two children, Elliot and Emma. And Chris has another son named Miles. Jeanne is involved in astrology and hypnosis, and she has been a certified hypnotherapist for fourteen years. Jeanne is a person who just likes to connect with people. On top of that, she co-hosts a national talk show alongside her husband. [Unquote].

According to people I talked to who'd watched the first episode, Unitarian Universalism was part of Jeanne's personal spiritual history and the family has a UU friend.

In the course of the show, Jeanne shares her hypnotherapy with one of the Perrin daughters, Ashley, and takes another, 14-year-old Brooke, on a shopping trip, encouraging her to make her *own* decisions, which is quite a contrast from her usual experience in the family of being constantly told what to do.

Meanwhile, Marguerite becomes increasingly frantic over the supposed "dark-sidedness" of her host family's interests, such as astrology and hypnotism and the "New Age" way they choose to decorate their home, including Tibetan prayer flags and gargoyles. She objects to a Solstice party her temporary

husband organizes to gently expose her to his family's interests. She's in constant prayer for God to defend her against the happy family with whom she's staying, which she increasingly sees as wicked for their differences from the type of religion she's used to. Marguerite tries desperately to convert the family to her version of Christianity, while not being willing to hear or experience anything from their point of view. On the other hand, when Marguerite says she has to go to church to counteract all the supposed horrors she's been going through with the laid-back D'Amico-Flisher's, the father of that family quickly agrees to have everyone go, as he thinks Marguerite would feel better in familiar territory.

When the end of the allotted swap comes, non-judgmental, "New Age" mom Jeanne has had a wonderful experience and the Perrin family has also. But, Marguerite, who's spent much of the episode doing what can only be described as "freaking out," being too busy judging and loudly denouncing everything and everyone around her to have any peace of mind at all (and driving everyone else crazy in the process) is tremendously relieved that now she can go home to "God's country," that is, where's *she's* from!

Which mother do you think best lived according to Jesus' teaching to judge not, to free others, to give and receive benefit?

Though this is an extreme case, I know Marguerite Perrin represents the attitudes and worldview of many people, though most others don't express them so dramatically. When you're raised in a family or live in a subculture where concepts of right and wrong are non-negotiable, when you're told the authority of your own particular tradition guarantees that you have the truth and everyone else is wrong and sinful, and when your own self-worth depends on a negative assessment of other people, a siege mentality can creep in. The world can seem a scary place indeed. I distinctly remember, at the Christian college I attended, an otherwise rational and intelligent fellow student warning me that, if I meditated, I'd open my mind to demonic possession!

If you're constantly told God is an angry judge, it's easy to slip into an attitude of judgment yourself, easy to segregate yourself away from people or ideas that call into question your own fragile worldview, easy to lash out at "non-believers," "heretics," "evil doers." And, what about that fear in the pit of the stomach when one considers that even one's self may not be worthy of God's love? This being a threatening idea, many



people will seek to distract themselves from it by concentrating on the perceived faults of others, and all the scapegoats of fundamentalist religion—homosexuals, women, religious minorities are in danger. One of the reasons Sigmund Freud held such a low opinion of religion was this tendency of religious people to project their own feared inadequacies onto outsiders—in other words, to be judgmental.

One of the most common reasons for people to leave churches is the recognition that many people condemn others for not living up to some standard, when the accusers themselves can't live up to it either. Both history and the contemporary scene are full of examples of scolds that get caught performing the very same actions they condemn: gay-bashers caught cruising, tough-on-drugs types caught using, moral crusaders caught lying, policemen caught stealing.

There are some types of behavior that can be very hurtful to ourselves and others. Other behaviors are really just a matter of our own choice or of being ourselves, and, though condemned by the self-righteous, are actually harmless or even beneficial. Education and learning from our own and others' experiences are invaluable tools when it comes to deciding which is which.

When charting our actions, we should always use the most sound judgment we can muster in choosing that affirm and promote “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” We must judge *actions*. And we must do all we can to prevent our fellow human beings, animals, or the environment from being hurt, even if that means separating a dangerous person from society. But that doesn’t mean we have to judge *people*. In fact, when you or I judge someone, condemn him or her as a person, we tend to retard his or her moral growth rather than encouraging it.

The French Existentialist writer, Albert Camus, wrote in one of his journals something to the effect that people constantly told they are miserable sinners will tend to act like miserable sinners.

It’s often been observed that what make 12-step programs or psychotherapy work is the value these systems place in non-judgmental listening.

Returning to the religious world, I personally have observed how I’ve made much more progress toward becoming a descent, compassionate, and fulfilled person as a Free Religionist than I ever did as a Fundamentalist. I still carry a lot of tapes and CD’s

in my head, born of fears of an arbitrary and judgmental God. Maybe you do, too. Voices that tell me I'm not worthy, that make me feel guilty for not being perfect, that I'm not as good as other people. These can all be leftovers of religious judgmentalism, whether we've experienced it firsthand in a former house of worship or whether it comes secondhand from the Puritan obsessions of our American culture.

This is not to say that Unitarian Universalism, or any other type of Free Religion, is perfect. We are all human, after all. I know of one UU congregation, which no longer exists, where there was a woman that stood at the church door judging whether visitors seemed to be "her kind of people." All others she did her best to encourage to leave.

Even in this congregation, I've heard reports of people acting rudely toward others they don't approve of, how external things like a person's income or ideas are used as excuses for not getting to know a them and welcome him or her into our spiritual community. I know we can do better than that!

One of our Principles calls us to "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations."

When a congregation is functioning at its best, members and staff gently help each other better themselves, heal old hurts, learn new skills, while setting proper boundaries on hurtful behavior.

Returning for a moment to Jesus, Matthew's version of Jesus' "judge not" teaching, in The Sermon on the Mount, is followed by something of an absurdist image. He warns his disciples not to be like someone stressing out about the speck of dust in someone else's eye while ignoring the huge wooden beam in their own. Jesus does not deny that people have their faults. That's obvious to everyone. But he does say that in order to help someone else's shortcomings we should first address our own.

American Buddhist author Jack Kornfield, in our contemporary reading, also addresses himself the subject of right relations with imperfect human beings. I think he mirrors the teaching of Jesus in that he points to the beneficial effects of non-judgment, which, considered positively, is nothing but compassion—a constant theme of all authentic spiritual traditions. Kornfield writes,

There is no formula for the practice of compassion. Like all of the spiritual arts, it requires that we listen and attend, understand our motivation, and then ask

ourselves what action can really be helpful.... Instead of holding the ideal that we should be able to give endlessly with compassion for all beings “except me,” we find compassion for all beings including ourselves.

In our Essential Spirituality group, we read a kind of tongue-in-cheek story about some spiritual seekers going to see a guru on a mountaintop. After making the arduous climb, one of them asks the guru, “How do I live a good life?” The guru, without batting an eye, responds, “Make good choices.” Not satisfied with that rather vague answer, the seeker asks, “How do I know which are good choices?” The guru responds, “By making bad choices.”

Part of non-judgment, or compassion, is allowing people to make their own mistakes, even as we make our own, and accepting them as they, like we, “live and learn.

Non-judgment, compassion, love, are what heal us and what, ultimately, heal the world. In that spirit, I will close with these words of Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. Mark Mosher DeWolfe:

... people who love are like stones tossed into a pool.  
There circles of love radiate out and echo back long

after the stone has come to rest on the bottom. So remember your love as a source of strength; remember who you are: lovers tossed by these difficult times.