

I'm Just Saying... (Sermon on the Mount #14)  
Matthew 7:1-6, Romans 14:9-19  
April 24, 2016  
Pastor Dave Carver

As someone who spends most of my life either talking or listening, I'd like to come clean about one aspect of our English language that frustrates the heck out of me.

I'm just saying...

Have you heard that? I know you have. He says, "Man, if I had to sit through one more of those classes, I think I'd have smacked my head against the wall!" You say, "Um, you know that's my uncle that teaches those classes, right?" And he says, "Oh, man, look – I'm just saying..."

National Public Radio host Scott Simon says this:



"I'm just saying," puts a fire escape onto the end of a sentence. It lets you express a stern — even rude — opinion, but not really. You're just saying. It invites the listener to discount what we've just heard, even as we're reeling

from it.

The Urban Dictionary website explains that the phrase makes it "possible to deliver a rude comment or burn and have it bounce off simply as an opinion disguised as an objective opinion, and who can argue with you over an opinion that you don't apparently support."<sup>1</sup>

You've seen it. You've said it, perhaps. You drop a verbal bomb and then just before it goes off, you think you can disarm it by simply stating, "Hey, I'm just saying..."

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<sup>1</sup> "It's Rude! It's Crude! It's Stupid! Just Sayin'"

<http://www.npr.org/2010/12/18/132160770/its-rude-its-crude-its-stupid-just-sayin>



I'd like to ask you to try something with me this morning. I understand that folks who play for our team have been told, with good reason, to avoid 'graven images'. I don't want to incite you to idolatry at all. But I do want you to spend a moment and come up with an image in your mind. The only thing I'll tell you is that you're *not* allowed to use "Jesus" as your answer to this question.

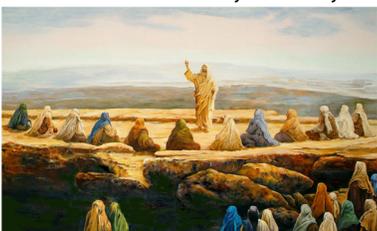
If the church had a single face, if Christianity had a profile, who would it look like to you? If you had to describe the way that the church looked as a person, and you couldn't use a picture of Jesus, whose picture would you use? Think about that for a moment.

I'm afraid that for too many people in the world, the church looks like this:



I'm not sure why or how it happened, but I think that there are a lot of people who, if I asked them to describe for me what they imagine when they think of those who bear the name of Jesus, they picture an angry, judgmental, person who is screaming.

Now, I'm just saying, but... if this is what comes to mind when people contemplate the followers of the Prince of Peace, well, maybe we're doing it wrong.



*The Sermon on the Mount*, Brian Ahn, 2012

<sup>2</sup>We begin the final chapter of the Sermon on the Mount today. If you've been

here all year, you'll remember that way back in chapter five, we talked about the *perisson* – the extraordinariness that marks the life of the disciple. Do you remember that? How often Jesus said, “Look, you learned it this way, but I’m telling you, you’ve got to go beyond that... Look past murder to anger; past adultery to lust; past not lying to being a person of absolute integrity... If you want to follow me, you’ve got to be willing be inwardly and totally transformed, not merely pick up a few new habits.

And then in chapter six we considered the call to true righteousness that Jesus set before his followers – the ways that we practice our prayer, our giving, and our fasting that transform us and make the world better for our neighbors.

As we come into the home stretch of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites us to consider how we who would follow Jesus are to relate to each other and to the world around us. Even as he tells his disciples that they are obliged to live lives that are different from those who surround them, the Lord says, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Discipleship does not afford us a point of vantage from which to attack others; we come to them with an unconditional offer of fellowship, with the single-mindedness of the love of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> We are to approach each other from the stance of love and encouragement rather than judging or critique.

“Do not judge, or you, too, will be judged...” What is Jesus’ point here? It can’t be that he’s telling us to avoid making any kind of discerning remark or turning a blind eye to the faults of others. He’s not saying that we are not to evaluate the behaviors and strategies of those around us, and to seek to model healthier choices where appropriate. There are all kinds of places in the Sermon and in Gospels where he tells us to do exactly those things.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship* (Macmillan Paperback, 1963, p. 204)

The worst  
part of  
censorship is

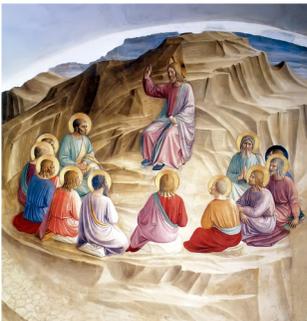
What he is doing, I believe, is warning us against the sin of censoriousness. That's not a word that we use every day, but perhaps you know the word "censor" – one who decides which idea or behavior is appropriate and which is not. When I say a person is censoriousness, I mean that person is a negative critic who enjoys pointing out how others have fallen short – someone who gets a real kick out of noting all the ways that someone else has failed, and gleefully correcting that person – often publicly.

In the passage we've heard today, Jesus is saying, "Look, I'm inviting you to come on board as a follower, a disciple. I don't need any enforcers."



More than that, Jesus specifically (and humorously) warns his followers against hypocrisy. The image of someone attempting to do the delicate work of helping a friend remove a small particle of dust from their eye while having a giant log protruding from their own face is meant to be alarming.

Earlier in the sermon, Jesus warned against the hypocrisy of practicing our faith in order to be seen by other people rather than as a means to commune with our Creator. Here, he condemns the ways that we are prone to become fascinated with the apparent shortcomings of someone else while conveniently overlooking our own sinfulness.



<sup>4</sup>The first two-thirds of the Sermon on the Mount teach us to live in a posture of humility and repentance; our Lord challenges us to grow a generous spirit and a gracious heart. How can I attack someone when my arms are open toward them in an embrace? How can I step on

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<sup>4</sup> *The Sermon on the Mount*, Fra Angelico (1387-1455)

you when I'm already on my knees in repentance and gratitude?

In this passage, Jesus invites us to remember and to recognize our own sinfulness and shortcomings before we presume to call attention to those of our sisters or brothers.

And you say, "Fair enough, Dave, but are we just supposed to let anything go? Doesn't the scripture point out time after time that if we see someone engaged in sin, we're supposed to help them through it? We're supposed to call them on it? We're supposed to challenge them to do better?"

You're right. We are called to do that. But not in a way that weaponizes the truth or diminishes the humanity of our sisters and brothers. We can only begin conversation with the other when we recognize that we, too, have fallen short of what Christ expects of us.

Why do you think that we have a prayer of confession near the beginning of worship every week? Because before we can rightly hear the Word of God, before we can approach God in prayer, before we can offer our gifts to God, we need to remember that we're not who we'd like to be, we're not who we're called to be, and lots and lots of days, we're far from who we pretend to be. When we acknowledge that kind of brokenness in our own lives, it's hard to get too self-righteous about the sin we see in our neighbor's life.

Richard Rohr is one of the leading Catholic social thinkers today, and he has said, "Authentic spirituality is always about changing you. It's not about trying to change anyone else."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> quoted at <https://twitter.com/cccstayner/status/701775977668431874>

If I am paying attention to the first two chapters of the Sermon on the Mount, the only way that I'll be able to approach you with any commentary on your own behavior is in a posture of gentleness and humility. Paul said as much when he was writing to his friends in Rome. Apparently, there had been some disagreement in that congregation as to whether it was appropriate for believers to buy meat from pagan butchers – if an animal had been sacrificed to a false god, could that animal be eaten in good conscience? Friendships were breaking up over this question, and the unity of the church was at stake. In response, Paul reminded Christians that each of us is accountable to God in every situation; the people with whom we are so upset are people for whom Jesus died. Paul wondered whether our treatment of others would be more likely to draw them closer to the love of Jesus, or to drive them away.

Look, there are all kinds of reasons for us to look at each other's behavior and wonder about it. Chances are you've already had sixteen opportunities today to either take or give offense to someone else. We disagree on who we want in which bathrooms, on how our government should spend its money, on what we ought to do on the Sabbath, on how we discipline our children... I know. I know.

And much of that merits conversation. Some of that deserves to be challenged. I know. I know.

Yet how will we speak? And how will we be heard? Again, to return to Richard Rohr: he once wrote, "I have prayed for years for one good humiliation a day, and then, I must watch my reaction to it. I have no other way of spotting both my denied shadow self and my idealized persona."<sup>6</sup>

What a gutsy prayer that is! What if every day, before I got on Facebook, before you showed up at work, before either one of us thought it was our responsibility to proclaim

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<sup>6</sup> from *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.

where the rest of the world has fallen short, we asked God to show us a place we needed to grow?

And what if we were gutsy enough to ask each other for help in being that kind of people?

I'm just saying...

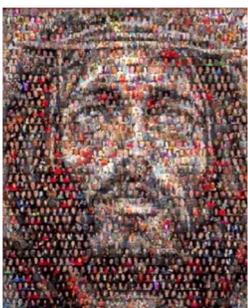
No, I'm not just saying... I'm telling you that every day (and twice on Sundays!) I *know* that I fall short of being the man that God calls me to be, and yet here I am standing up here challenging you to do it better. I'm asking you to live with a generous spirit today, to choose to know the truth about yourself and to believe the best about your neighbor. I'm asking you to cut that person with whom you disagree some slack, to risk being a little more encouraging than you might normally be, and to try to get a glimpse of someone else's life from their perspective before you presume to tell that person how wrong she or he is.

Here's the deal, my friends: at the beginning of this message I asked you to imagine what people might think of when they think of the church – what picture they had when they thought of what Jesus might say, and how he might say it.



should be.

I don't know who you pictured when I asked you that, but here's the truth: do you want to know what your world thinks Jesus looks like? Look in the mirror. That's not the whole answer, but that's a part of it – or it



Look in the mirror, and remind me to do the same, and perhaps together we can help the world to see the Christ who loves them like crazy. Let us "make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification". Thanks be to God. Amen.