

In yesterday's paper, there were at least four news items having to do with sexual misconduct.

That's 4 too many.

But several words kept popping up in these articles:

- accused,
- alleged,
- allegations.

These words should give us pause as we reflect on such matters.

They should signal the need for humility as we talk about these situations.

Because it may be that someone who is accused and alleged to have done something is actually innocent.

And if so, then everyone who has acted as both judge and jury outside the courtroom

**is guilty of bearing false witness,
ruining a person's reputation and career,
and acting as though he or she were God.**

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Certainly, Christians should uphold a high standard of obedience to our Lord Jesus and the commands he kept.

We should remind one another that men groping women is wrong;
and that false accusation is also wrong.

But we must be careful in considering particular cases not to make assumptions or come to judgment before the truth is known.

- It may or may not be true that Roy Moore did what he is accused of.
- **But it is surely true that *we* do not know.**
- And therefore, we are in no position to speak of him as if we did.
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- It may or may not be true that the women making accusations are being honest.
- **But it is surely true that *we* do not know.**
- So we don't make assumptions as though we do.

Thankfully, accusations will be fully investigated, and the truth discovered and acted upon by a judge.

Judgement is based on facts – not accusations and allegations.

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Yet, judgement is an important part of human life and Christian life.

But it is also confusing.

Judge not lest you be judged, Jesus cautions.

And yet, we just heard a Bible story about Deborah the judge and prophetess.

We also have judges in our civic realm, who make decisions that – ideally—promote justice.

So how do we reconcile this admonition of Jesus with the presence and necessity of judgement?

We might start by clarifying what we mean by judging.

People often complain about other people being “judgy”.

- And in that sense, we seem to mean others should not call our choices into question.
- Other people should not, we believe, impose their own values and beliefs on us.
- They should not tell us we are wrong
- And above all, they should not imply that we are bad people because of choices they disagree with.

There is something *to* that understanding,

because each person is –ultimately – responsible for him or herself.

Each of us will face the consequences of our choices.

But there is also something out of kilter with that notion of “judgy”.

It does not take into account a loving community of Jesus followers.

Within the Christian community, there is a place for speaking the truth in love

– that is, reminding a brother or sister in Christ who is going astray

that **the path to life is in a different direction.**

None of us would want to be walking toward a cliff

while our friends and family stood by silently,

not wanting to judge us and

therefore not warning us of imminent danger, right?

So judgment is something we do on a daily basis,
choosing between right and wrong,
between good and better.

And it is something we do for other believers as an expression of love,
Careful not to diminish the *person* whose behavior we judge.

Take Deborah as an example.

Deborah was a judge in Israel.

- In ancient times, a judge functioned as a mayor and magistrate rolled into one.
- She leads the community and hears cases of dispute and rules on them.
- Deborah also was a prophetess, hearing and speaking God's Word to the people.

Deborah judged between two human parties.

What she did not do – what was beyond her authority – **was judge between a person and God.**

what does it mean, then, when Jesus says “*Judge not, lest you be judged*”?

We come close to the meaning if we substitute “condemn” for the word judge.

Condemn not, lest you be condemned.

Condemnation has to do with a person before God.

It is a matter of life and death,
of salvation or damnation.

And truly, the only Judge with the authority to condemn is God.

The judgement we exercise is limited to behavior and moral discernment among people.

Though we may think or say to someone, “Go to ...a place of fire and torment”, we are overstepping our authority.

We are making a judgment that is only God’s to make, and therefore are ourselves liable for condemnation.

Condemn not lest you be condemned.

This is the reminder for us whenever we are reacting to news of allegations and accusations

or tempted to diminish the personhood of another sinner.

For we are all sinners. That is a fact.

Each one of us has good reason to be ashamed of the things we have done, thought, or said, especially about others.

Each one of us is under a sentence of condemnation for our sin

– as St. Paul writes to the Romans:

God's judgment following one trespass – Adam's—brought condemnation to all people.

And not a lifetime of good deeds or religious devotion can overturn that just verdict upon our souls.

But I have good news!

What Paul said about condemnation was only the beginning of the sentence.

The rest of the sentence says: *“But the free gift following many trespasses brought justification –*

So, what is this free gift and where did it come from?

The gift is salvation

– that is, God's **forgiveness of all our sins and life in joy and hope.**

That gift comes by Jesus – truly God and truly human

– dying on the cross as the consequence

– not of his sins, but of ours.

By his death, we are put right with God

– **in Christ, our sins are not held against us.**

Jesus accepted God's judgment of condemnation so that we might go free. **This is what we call grace.**

So St. Paul continues in Romans 5:

For if many died through Adam's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of Jesus Christ abounded for the many.”

And all who receive God's grace live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

As those who by faith have received this grace in Holy Baptism,

- let us live as those who no longer do evil in the sight of God,
- who speak the truth in love,
- and who exercise judgment within the proper boundaries,
- letting the Lord decide the ultimate fate of individuals.

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So what can we say at the lunch table or coffee shop when the conversation turns to headlines?

Try these:

- I'll reserve judgment until the facts are in.
- That's for God to decide.
- I am reluctant to condemn someone.
- Such behavior is disgraceful, but we don't know if the allegations are true in this instance.
- It is good when victims speak up about their experience and I hope they are honest when they do.
- I don't think it is right to make assumptions.

By resisting the "lynch mob mentality",

--the temptation to be judge and jury without authority,

we demonstrate the difference Jesus makes in our lives;

And perhaps that sparks conversations about faith, sin, and grace that are much more fruitful than any other topic.

May the Holy Spirit so work in us to give us right judgment in all things.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen