

Being Judged

A number of years ago I had the privilege of attending a pastors' coffee group that met every Wednesday from 9:00 to 10:00. We never gathered early, and we never stayed beyond 10:00 out of respect for the commitments others may have made. When I first joined that group, we would often have an assigned reading upon which we would reflect for the hour, but gradually that fell by the wayside, and we gathered just to talk. We were all pastors in the Christian Reformed Church (with one exception, a pastor from the Reformed Church of America). Some of us were serving in churches while others served in chaplaincy, and a number of our group were retired. We represented a variety of different perspectives, and our churches were quite different from each other with respect to style of worship and demographics.

But, I discovered quite quickly, there was a mutual respect among the pastors of that group, and we also committed ourselves to keeping confidential anything that was said in confidence. Thus, we could feel free to speak our minds and trust that what we said would not go beyond the room, and we could also trust that when others responded, it was always done from a position of respect and caring.

Of all opportunities for growth and learning, this pastors' group was the one that influenced me the most, and I grew more from attending that gathering almost consistently for about seven years than I did from all my years of formal education. (I also recognize that I needed the formal education in order to be able to participate in the conversations.) I did not always agree with the other pastors gathered around that table, nor did they agree with me, but we learned together, and we grew together.

Often times we hear people say that they feel most comfortable in places where they are not judged. I understand the sentiment, but I do not think that we should always seek those situations. Certainly this pastors' gathering was not a place where there was no judgement. In fact, we felt quite comfortable disagreeing with each other and openly challenging each other. Some might have even perceived that we were judging each other, and it might not have felt like a safe place to some. Yet, I and perhaps all of the others in attendance did not feel unsafe or vilified. True, our perspectives and even our values came under the scrutiny of others, and that was not always comfortable, but it was always safe.

It was safe because of the parameters of the group. As I mentioned earlier, we kept confidentiality when necessary and we respected each other. We were able to share what was on hearts, knowing that others would evaluate us, challenge us, and even call for change. In a sense, we were judged, but we were judged by people who cared.

My wife and I had a similar experience with an older couple who became our friends and mentors. The woman was the kind of person who spoke her mind, and she did so very clearly. She was not always diplomatic, and she had strong opinions that she voiced without hesitation. She had some clear opinions about our lives, and sometimes she made us uncomfortable. Nevertheless, we visited often, and we listened to her, sometimes disagreeing with her, but we always appreciated her input. Why? Because we knew that she had our best interests in mind. We appreciated her judgement about how we were living our lives.

It does seem that for many today, not being judged is the highest ideal. They won't associate with anyone who might dare say something about their lives or beliefs. As soon as their perspective or lifestyle is challenged, they withdraw, sometimes openly condemning the one who challenged them. The highest value placed on us today is to be free from the judgement of others.

Sadly, when we avoid situations where others might say something about us, we are also missing out on the opportunity to grow. Yes, we do want to avoid situations where others want to condemn us instead of wanting us to grow, for their intentions are evil. However, if we never want anyone to comment on our lives or our values or our beliefs, we will be giving up significant opportunities to become better people. To not be open to the judgment of others is to shortchange ourselves.

I must confess that I miss those gatherings every Wednesday morning. I miss the camaraderie, and I miss the conversations. But most of all, I miss being able to talk together about important things, perhaps laying our souls bare in an environment where I knew that I might receive negative feedback but also in an environment where I knew that those who gave it cared enough to want me to become a better person. I would rather be among those who judge me with the intent of helping me than be among those who affirm me because they don't want to offend me. The former is helpful even though it may be difficult while the latter is comfortable but not very beneficial.

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