

“Peter Principle”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau

for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Matthew 7:1-14

July 23, 2017 - Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

My brother, Peter, and I spent a good chunk of our childhood New York City summers hanging out with our cousin Marisa, who would visit from Florida for two months each year. She was a little bit older than us, and a whole lot cooler than us, so Marisa set the agenda for how we would play. One afternoon, she decided we would each get a turn living out or dream job.

Marisa was a rock star— the lead singer in a world famous band. I was the next ranking cousin, so I got to be the bass player. Poor Pete, the youngest, had to be one of our fans. Next up, I decided to be a world famous chef. This was in the days before the Food Network, so I can only imagine my ten year-old brain conjured up some weird cross between Julia Child, Jacque Pepin, and Mel from Mel’s Diner on the TV show *Alice*. Pete was a waiter, and Marisa was my adoring customer.

Finally, we let the little guy have a turn. I figured he’d want to be an athlete or a movie star. But with much excitement, Pete declared that he was going to a bus driver. Marisa and I quickly grew bored with getting on and off of us his imaginary bus, but Pete demanded that we live out the fantasy until he was ready to call it quits. We were completely baffled by his blue collar aspirations.

Several years before that, when my brother was four or five and more pliable, I sat him in front of the couch in our living room and I told him that he was “the people.” I, of course, was “God.” From on high, I told the people what to do, demanded praise, and I amused myself by casting down weather calamities. A snowstorm was accomplished by whacking the arm of the couch and watching the dust dance in sunlight coming through the venetian blinds. Pete just sat there, playing along, being the people.

How early we learn to plop ourselves down on the throne of judgment! Humans spend far more time making ourselves into gods than we do contemplating God’s providence or existence or nature. And Jesus knew that, and so we get this next piece of the Sermon on the Mount.

He’s told us who’s blessed, and that we’re salt and light, and where to store up our treasures and to rely on God and to expend our energy on reign of God work instead of on worrying. And now he’s talking about the things that poison the community of the reign of God and how easily we reach for them. He knows we want to climb up on that couch and bring down some hellfire and control the world like a chessboard.

Jesus starts by telling us to put down the gavel and not judge. The gavel is not ours. Oh wow, does he know us! It’s not just that judging is mean or unfair, it’s that it’s not our job. Not our robe. Not our bench. Not our courtroom. Judging is God’s work, and if we try to take that role, we’ll find that we end up in a kangaroo court, a room full of judges all banging their gavels in unison. It’s not exactly the vision of community. . We have a role in the courtroom, though. Our role is to testify — to bear witness to God’s love and compassion.

Okay, so don't judge. But Jesus wants to get more specific: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye?" Two thousand years of hearing these words have absolutely destroyed their comedic effect. I'm not saying this is Jesus's best material, but I've heard it said that everything is twenty percent funnier from the pulpit than it would be anywhere else, so we can imagine the crowd at least chuckling at the idea: a dude walking around with a big ol' log sticking out of his eye, and then he walks up to someone and says "Hey, you've got something in your eye! Let me help you there!"

Imagine a Facebook post that went something like this:

"I have carefully examined my own biases and sought out other viewpoints. I wonder what you think about this news story."

And then the comments:

"Ah, I disagree immensely. But that is merely my gut reaction. Let me consider what I have to gain or lose from this situation and see if that might be impacting my emotional response."

"Oh, I agree wholeheartedly. But perhaps there's something about this I'm not able to see or understand. Do you have an experience different from mine that might shed new light on this?"

That sounds preposterous to us. But we're in the Sermon on the Mount, where everything sounds preposterous.. Jesus offers us some holy ophthalmology here. We need our own eyes checked before we tell someone else their sight is compromised. We need to align our vision with God's — we need corrective lenses — instead of equating the way we see things with holy truth. We've put ourselves in the throne and all we've got is a throne room full of log-eyed people, each on their separate throne.

Ah, but if we can let God be God and give ourselves over to God's reign, we begin to see more clearly how to testify rather than judge. We are called to humble ourselves, to recognize that we don't have all the evidence, so we'd better put down the gavel. Leave the unfair judgment to the empire, to Rome, who tramples and mauls.

With new eyes that look inward before they scan for flaws in others, we find intimacy with our God. We ask. We search. We knock. Last Sunday we talked about the posture of worry, and how it leaves us unable to do God's work. Here we use our voice to ask, our bodies to search, and our hands to knock, and we find that when we have let God be God, we find answers and open doors. We don't get God the genie. We don't get to list off every wish and have it granted. Instead of listing, we listen, and we find God collaborating and co-creating with us. We find bread and fish, not stones and snakes. We find answers to prayers we could not have uttered when we were walking around as would-be-gods.

None of this is easy. Jesus calls it a "narrow gate," this way that leads to life. It is so hard to truly understand ourselves. And it's even harder, then, to seek to understand others. I see the plight of one I don't know well, and a thousand questions pop into my mind about what they could have done differently. I see the quirks of another, and I wonder why they can't be more like me. And some of those might be valid questions. The point here is that to seek the narrow gate, to follow Christ, means that as

we approach another child of God, those questions are God's to ask. We've got more than enough questions about our own path to keep us occupied.

When I would get bossy as a kid, one of my brother's favorite questions was, "Who died and made you boss?" The "Peter Principle" was published in the late 1960s. It's a business management theory that states that a person is selected for a job based on their previous performance in their current role, not their ability to effectively function in the new job. Therefore, the principle continues, employees will only stop being promoted once they can no longer perform effectively. So we rise to the level of our incompetence.

I know next to nothing about business management, and I'm definitely not looking for a promotion. I certainly meet wonderfully competent people every day, certain government offices and telecommunications companies notwithstanding. Yet I think this Peter Principle teaches us something about the reign of God.

I go through my days and I manage to avoid disaster on most of them. I'm pretty happy with my life. I put on matching shoes today. I haven't been swindled lately. My refrigerator is running just fine. I love Jesus. I try to help people. I give to my church. I'm not widely considered to be a jerk. I know I'm a beloved child of God, and most days I believe it. I call my mom once a week. Children and animals aren't afraid of me. People seem to trust me. I think I'm narrow gate-ing the heck out of this thing.

So why not kick it up a notch? I've earned the right to look down on some folks. I know that some people are messed up, and I know what they should be doing. If they'd just listen to me...boy, this gavel has a nice weight to it. I'll just judge a little bit. You know, like Judge Judy. What harm could I really do? The throne of justice needs warming up; it seems God's been distracted lately.

I'm eight years old and I'm climbing up a couch cushion.

We are not very good gods and rulers. The wide gate of judgment has led to violence and oppression and bitterness and empire. We give each other snakes and stones, hoarding fish and bread for ourselves. We're not good at this at all. It feels so good, though, the judging and the asking for what we need and the pointing out of the speck in our neighbor's eyes.

And Jesus asks "Who died and made you king?"

And we stare, incredulously annoyed at first, and then our sneer softens and our faith builds and our hearts crack a bit, and in all of it – in the unbelief of such a silly question and in the belief that melts our face and in the brokenness that makes our lip quiver – in all of it we respond, "You did. You did. You did."

The narrow gate requires us to shed our crowns and robes and to pound our gavels into ploughshares. We follow a king who dies from the weight of judgment, a judge who receives the sentence. And our job, the competence to which we are called, is to testify to the glory of it all.