

“Specks, Logs, and Fruit-bearing Words”
June 6, 2010

Isaiah 55:10-13
Luke 6:39-49

Then Jesus asked his disciples, “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, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?”

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Chey and I have been a couple for nearly 28 years. In those years, we have had at least 10 cats, and, until fairly recently, we’ve always let those cats come and go, from inside to outside to inside to outside – sometimes, of course, in the space of ten minutes. Many of you know the routine: in, out, in, out, over and over again, and at all times of the day and night.

I confess that I never thought much about where all those kitties went or what they were doing when they went outside. Each one was spayed or neutered, so I wasn’t worried about adding to cat overpopulation. As for the *other* things cats do when they’re outside – the things they leave behind in the dirt – well, maybe I was just too much of a prude – or too deep into denial – to ponder just *where* our cats were doing what they were doing.

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Jesus asked his disciples, “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, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?”

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In Sonoma, without really thinking about it, Chey and I have ended up being indoor cat people, which means that, at least in one important respect, we’ve become better neighbors than we’ve ever been for almost 28 years. We no longer have one or two or three or even four cats who “do their business” outside, in our yard *and* in other people’s yards. So now we can congratulate ourselves for being better neighbors, at least when it comes to cat comings and goings.

And wouldn’t you know it, now that we’ve gotten indoor cat religion, so to speak, and have begun our own major gardening efforts, we’ve been battling the presence and presents of our neighbors’ cats in our beautiful new garden beds. Morning after morning, Chey or I have gone outside with a keen eye, only to discover a malodorous “gift” – or two or three – from our neighbors’ cats. Day after day, I’ve had to get the scoop and remove the leavings of someone else’s beloved pets. And, day after day, I’ve wanted to tell our cat-owning neighbors that they’re not being good neighbors and that they need to restrain their kitties and keep them out of our garden.

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Jesus asked his disciples, “How can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?”

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So, yes, I've wanted to remove the specks from my neighbors' eyes without grappling with the near-forest that had accumulated in my own over two dozen years. I saw plenty of specks in their *ojos*, but nothing in my own. But, ah, the Spirit's been whispering in my ear on this one for a while: "Hello? Don't you remember when ... when your cats were doing you-know-what you-*don't-know-where*?" And then, as if that whispering wasn't enough, along comes Jesus, holding up a very large, very accurate mirror. Over time, with some significant prodding, I've opened my eyes and finally seen a log or two or ... eight, actually, one for each *use logs* wandering cat in our past.

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Then Jesus said to his disciples, "How can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, *first* take the log out of your own eye, and *then* you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."

In this morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is laying some of the foundation for what it takes to be a good neighbor and for what it takes to be a faithful church. For the church, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "life together" and Martin Luther King called "the beloved community," Jesus is offering some basic rules: watch out for collective ignorance, hierarchies, and hypocrisy; attend to what resides in your heart, because the "treasure of the heart" will fundamentally shape what you say and do; and, for heaven's sake, remember that the life of faith is a life of action, of *practice*, not simply a life of ideas and theologies.

"First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." Please note that the model here is not "everything goes." The model is not "live and let live." The model here includes noticing and naming the logs in our own eyes – the brokenness, the shortcomings – dare I say it? – the sin in our own lives – *and* it includes helping others see the specks in their eyes – the brokenness, the shortcomings, the sin in *theirs*. This model includes responsibility for the well-being, the faithfulness, and the fruitfulness of one another, but *only* if we start with a deep honesty about our own foibles, follies, and failures. We can hold out a vision of love, compassion, mercy, and justice for others, and we can hold one another accountable to it, but only if we ourselves keep a searching and fearless eye on self, first and foremost.

I don't think this is breaking news for you. I don't think hypocrisy is rampant in the life and faith of the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC. While I imagine that, in truth, each of you has your own version of my cats-in-the-dirt log and speck story of your own *pick up log*, I doubt that you live in that place of self-righteousness *pick up more logs* most of your days.

And yet. And yet ... this church, like all human communities, is vulnerable to fixating on others' specks while ignoring our own logs.

In the face of the horrifying, heartbreaking destruction of the Gulf oil spill, it's all too easy to condemn BP *and* our neighbors who may drive Hummers, SUV's, and other gas guzzlers, without ever getting around to looking at our own habits of oil consumption and over-consumption.

In the face of what some of us may see as mindless patriotism and warmongering, it's all too easy to condemn the military-industrial complex, war profiteers, and bellicose

politicians, without ever getting around to asking ourselves why we haven't become war tax resisters, if we're so opposed to war.

In the face of what we may see as intolerance, bigotry, and ignorance in fundamentalist churches, it's all too easy to condemn *their* narrow-mindedness and failure to offer hospitality to all of God's people, without ever asking ourselves whether we offer anything to members of those churches other than our own brand of progressive Christian judgment and intolerance.

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Jesus is calling us to take the logs out of our own eyes first, so that we may then be of some help to others. He is calling us to be honest about our own struggles and mistakes, so that we can bring humility, love, and mercy to the struggles and mistakes of others.

It's no surprise, of course, that our congregational covenant, which we have affirmed and celebrated today in welcoming Amy, Joan, Pat, and Libby, calls us on the same path, the path on which we

- love and support one another
- listen and learn from one another
- forgive and trust one another, and
- pray for and with one another.

From the Bible, from our covenant, and from other voices and sources, we hear the same call to help each other become people of love and humility. But before we start to think that congregational life is all about supporting one another in our self-improvement projects, or that congregational life is all about what *we* can do, hear again God's call this morning through the prophet Isaiah:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it will accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

In other words, we are not in this log and speck removal project on our own. We are not in this loving, supporting, forgiving, trusting one another endeavor on our own. Just as the earth receives the rain and snow that make life and growth possible, so we, too, receive the blessings that make our life together possible. We have received and continue to receive the Word of God, the Word that makes joy and peace, love and healing, possible.

The promise of God is that this holy word of life will not disappear, will not dissipate, until it has accomplished what it was sent here to accomplish. The promise is that this Word of life, this Word that we understand and experience in countless different ways, will not return to the cosmos empty, unfruitful, or unheeded.

This Word of Life is here, in you, in me, in those with whom we disagree, and in those in whom we seem unable to see any good, any love, any blessing. The Word of Life is here, making it possible for us to live into our covenant, making it possible to recognize those big logs in our own eyes and to help remove the specks from others' eyes.

The Word of Life is here, and it is going to stay here, until all the world can go out in joy and be led back in peace. It is moving within you, always seeking to seep into more of your heart, your hands, and your dreams. It is speaking to you and through you, guiding you to build your house and your life on a foundation of faith, mercy, and love. The Word of Life seeks to be incarnate in you and will keep seeking to be incarnate in you, so that you – logs, specks, and all – can bear the fruit of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

Hear the Word in and through Isaiah and in and through Jesus for what it is – a promise never to give up on us, a promise to be with us, to shape us, to lead us, and to use us as bearers of joy, peace, and compassion.

My beloveds, hear the Word in and through our covenant with God and with one another, as it promises to continue to turn this congregation into a beacon of hope, a people of prayer, and a community of fruitful grace.

Hear the Word, and dare to believe.

Hear, and dare to live as you believe.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
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