

Sermon A Log in the Eye  
Copyright Sarah K. Person  
Delivered February 7, 2016 The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

Unitarian Universalists may not all believe the same things about Jesus. But many of us do believe that he was a teacher that had something to say about the way we should be in this life and the way we should treat one another. But how many of us apply his lessons to our own lives?

Take this lesson. This lesson is called the Mote and the Beam discourse on judgmentalism. Other translations use splinter or board or plank. In any event, it's one of the lessons that appear in both the Books of Matthew and Luke. It was a fairly well-known proverb among other cultures of the time, and my guess is it would have appealed to the son of a carpenter.

Let me get this out of the way: Ouch.

This has to be one of the most uncomfortable images in the New Testament. To a kid reading this passage literally it was completely gross; people walking around with a logs coming out of their eyes. What's more, they don't notice; don't even know it's there until Jesus points it out. Then, at some point I figured out what a metaphor was. Aha.

Meaning: we notice someone else's imperfection right away, the speck in their eye. We know that speck is something that is keeping them from seeing their way clearly, and we assume they're making mistakes because of it. And we're quick to point them out and to tell them how to take it out. But, when we try telling someone else what to do, we're as blind to our own faults and imperfections as we are to our own motives. Let us be clear about our own health and reasons before we give advice to someone else. Otherwise we're blinded by our own hypocrisy. I get that.

But why, I asked myself, in this day and age, should we care about the speck in our neighbor's eye? They go their way, we go ours. We can just agree to disagree and leave it at that, can't we?

In those days, think about who we were if we were listening to Jesus to begin with: We're probably Jewish. We're finally, mostly, in one homeland in the world. But we're still, as usual, under the thumb of a foreign government. They mostly leave us alone, but they have the military might. We're Jewish and have a lot of experience surviving as oppressed people. We know that it's a survivor's instinct to try to get on the good side of our oppressors – to show to them that we have something in common so they don't think of us as less than human. And sometimes, we end up looking and sounding and worshipping just like our oppressors until we lose the essence of our faith. Like Tevye's rabbi, we like to say instead "God bless the czar and keep him far away from us!" Our primary preoccupation for centuries was and is: How do we stick together as a people – with shared values and beliefs – so that we don't become more like our conquerors and lose our identity?

In Jesus' day, we had codes of conduct, rules of behavior, so you knew your place in society and society depended on you knowing your place. If we violated those codes, we could receive everything from a scolding to a stoning. We depended on social, religious and political power rather than military might. We lived by a social system of who was morally superior to whom. It was a situation ripe for bossy people.

Jesus also wanted people to behave well, but for a different reason. He wanted people to realize that we were all in the same boat, weak and strong, and we needed to honestly care about one another, rather than who was morally superior to whom.

What do most of Jesus stories and instructions boil down to: rid yourself of your wealth or your power; or if you don't have wealth or power, then your sanctimonious self-righteousness. He was most aggravated (and yes, Jesus did get aggravated) when his followers protested that someone was not good enough for him, or clean enough, or respectable enough. What was his response? Get that log out of your eye. Put that stone down unless you think you are without sin. And no one is without sin. We are not perfect. We are not perfect, and we need to deal with that, and more importantly, we need the help of each other to deal with that.

This notion that it is through opening ourselves up and receiving wisdom from others is a universal one.

## The Story: A Cup of Tea

Nan-in was a Japanese Zen master during the late 1800s and through the turn of the century. One day he received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

I think as Unitarian Universalists, we've finally embraced the idea of our imperfection. It took a while. When we let go of the belief in original sin, we didn't quite have a theology for why we shouldn't think of ourselves as perfectly good just the way we were. Now we realize that we are perfectly imperfect, and that life's journey is a constant revelation of owning that and trying to do better. The lesson we've learned is that it is through our experiences with others that we learn the most about ourselves and bettering ourselves and the world around us.

Rev. Dr. Tony Larson *Why You Should Not Be a Unitarian Universalist*

He's both a therapist and a minister and his worlds overlap all the time.

"Some of the best therapists are the ones who know how to sin a little - maybe a lot. They're more tolerant of the human condition. They react with compassion rather than self-righteousness, with understanding instead of judgement.

I notice this phenomenon in myself when I'm driving. If someone in another car does something really jerky - like dart out in front of me or make a left turn out of a right lane - I get mad at first - but then I remember all the dumb things I've done, especially in my first few years of driving - and I can't be mad anymore.

Not long ago, I was driving up Main St. and I saw a pedestrian crossing the street right in front of me, and I thought, why don't these people obey the stop-and-go lights? Pedestrians are always jay-walking. And this guy crossing the street even had the nerve to look at me funny, as if I were in the wrong. The arrogance of that guy.

And then about 20 seconds later I see red flashing lights behind me and I pull over. The policeman asks me if I know what he's stopping me for. I didn't know. Turns out I had just moseyed on right through a red light.

Believe me, that incident has infinitely raised my compassion for jerky drivers. A little sin'll do that for you. That's why I think it should be a criterion for membership.

Now, if you think you're too good - you won't like it here. But with a little bit of hypocrisy and selfishness and deceit, you'll do fine. We're not asking you to try to develop those qualities, because you don't need to. Each and everyone of you already has them. We're just asking you to recognize them in yourself. It'll do wonders for your tolerance of others' foibles."

Our Unitarian Universalist ideal is that we don't try to fool ourselves that we're never wrong or that we've got all the answers. In fact, we pride ourselves on not having all the answers. That's the way we find common humanity with others; none of us is perfect but together we can be something more and do something greater.

Getting back to the lesson:

Are we never to make a judgment on our own? Never to take a stand? That's not what Jesus was saying. He still advocated for helping the other person with the speck in their eye. He was saying before you do that, check out your own faults, your own reasons, your own motives. Instead of self-righteousness, have self-awareness. More than self-awareness, have selflessness.

Believe me, I have to work at this as much as you do, in every facet of my life: ministry, family, volunteer work. There are times when I can see the right course of action so clearly and truly do not understand why others cannot. What's wrong with them, I fume. Don't they see how much harm they are doing? Or might do? Why do those fools cross the street in front of me; don't they know I have *the right way*? I am no more immune to hypocrisy and self-righteousness

than the next person. Unfortunately for me, I know it. I may not get mad at others so much, but I can get very irritated with myself!

How do we get the logs out of our eyes? Remember, we aren't aware of them, can't see them because they're blinding us. Maybe it's enough to know they're there. Maybe we have to empty ourselves of our opinions and speculations. Put them out on the table to look at next to that overflowing tea cup. Know they are as much a part of us as our skin and bones. And know that our neighbor has them too. That is what we have in common, and that is what we have to connect with. Not the act but the reason behind the act. Not our choices but the reasons behind our choices.

Why should we care about the speck in our neighbor's eye to begin with? Because all we see in there is our reflection. We only see the surface. We only see ourselves and our efforts. We can't see beyond that. The only way to budge the log in our eye is to forget about our reasons and truly care about how the speck got in our neighbor's.

And hope that our neighbor has the same compassion to care as much about us. May it be so.